

SPIRITUALITIES AND THE EFFECTS OF READING OR RECITING SACRED TEXT AS A
SPIRITUAL FORMATION PRACTICE IN ISLAMIC AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

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by
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ABSTRACT

SPIRITUALITIES AND THE EFFECTS OF READING OR RECITING SACRED TEXT AS A SPIRITUAL FORMATION PRACTICE IN ISLAMIC AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

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The primary purpose of this project is to explore how spirituality is defined and experienced in Islam and Christianity – in a general sense as well as a specific sense – as revealed in the writings of a prominent and influential figure from each religion, and in the emotional and spiritual experience of individuals who volunteered to engage in sacred text practices. A secondary purpose of the project is to learn about current understandings of how our religious experience impacts neurobiological and biochemical processes, and vice versa, and to explore the implications of these understandings for how we engage religious beliefs and spiritual practices in general. In other words, the project explores what physiological and psychophysiological experience accompanies spiritual experience. More specifically, the project investigates worshippers' experience of reading/reciting sacred text as a spiritual formation practice. The project involves interviews with questions related to the participants' experience of their usual sacred text practice, how they define spirituality, the spiritual capacities they engage in their practice, what the practice has taught them about themselves and about God, and anything else they thought was important to share in relation to their experience engaging sacred text. The project also involves the completion of emotional and spiritual experience questionnaires for reading/reciting sacred text from within their tradition and from another tradition. The predominance of headlines about various forms of violence based on racial and religious differences indicate to me that we are in dire need of greater religious understanding and acceptance. Comprehending and applying current findings about how the brain and body function – as well as hearing and applying what we learn from others' emotional and spiritual experience of spiritual formation practices in their own tradition – to how we worship and how we relate to God, ourselves, and each other seems especially pressing today.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Introduction and Problem

As a ‘non science guy,’ trying to become proficient in the field of neuroscience as it relates to religion and spirituality has seemed daunting. I began doctoral studies seeking specifically to learn about current understandings of how our religious experience impacts neurobiological and biochemical processes, and vice versa, and to explore the implications of these understandings for how we engage religious beliefs and spiritual practices in general. My interest was personal. In 2013 or 2014, some health challenges created an increase in my spiritual motivation (*himma*). In response, I went to Morocco to study with a Sufi master, to Vienna to do a 40-day retreat, to the Amazon rain forest for a week of ayahuasca ceremonies (not knowing what ayahuasca was at the time), to Jerusalem for Ramadan, to Medina and Mecca to perform the Islamic pilgrimage (*hajj*) – during which I repeatedly had the experience of seeming to be spiritually buoyed beyond my physicality, which raised the questions for me – what is spirituality, how is it experienced, and what physiological and psychophysiological experience accompanies spiritual experience?

As a man of Jewish lineage who grew up in a conservative Christian environment, whose extended family is predominantly conservative Christian, and who has spent years studying Islamic Sufism (Islamic mysticism) and practicing Islam, I have a particular interest in what neuroscience and psychophysiology reveal about the practical aspects of growing one’s love and knowledge of God, self and others, with an emphasis on cross-religious applications. (I am defining “mysticism” as a pathway of purifying and transforming the self to receive knowledge of God, knowledge of the meaning of sacred texts, as well as knowledge of the earthly and

divine realms; and to reach a sense of proximity to, presence with, or absorption in God, i.e., to experience God in a unitive sense, through both the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of a tradition, including the beliefs, practices, and other means of doing so. Simply put, mysticism is the means to experience the presence of God or union with God through attending to both the inner forms and outer forms of a tradition. It is a type/subset of spirituality.) As recitation is a daily part of my spiritual practices, and recitation is a practice that occurs in varied forms across religions, I am especially intrigued by these questions in relation to reading and reciting sacred text: What do current neuroscientific and psychophysiological studies and understandings say about reading or reciting sacred text, and by extension, what do they say, if anything, about engaging sacred text in the language associated with worship in the worshipper's religion? How do neuroscientific and psychophysiological perspectives help us (or not) understand and engage sacred text (by which I mean do we read it silently in English, meditate on passages from it, meditate on images from it, recite it aloud in its original language, etc.)? (For the purpose of this research, I am defining "sacred text" as the scriptures associated with a religion, such as the Bible, the Qur'ān, the Torah, the Talmud, the Tao Te Ching, the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, the Sutras of Patanjali, and Buddhist Sutras.) I am especially interested in comparing what happens physiologically, emotionally, and spiritually when someone reads or recites the sacred text associated with her religion (in the language associated with worship in that religion) with what happens when she reads or recites a text not associated with her religion.

Due to the indefinite closure of the Mind and Heart Psychophysiology Lab because of the coronavirus pandemic, and my inability (as a spiritual practitioner who is not a neuroscientist) to obtain the physiological data associated with such an inquiry, this project does not undertake answering the questions noted above. Rather, it strives to set the foundation for further

neurophysiological research that models an approach for analyzing spiritualities and spiritual formation practices, raises and describes these questions in such a way that contextualizes them, thereby demonstrating their importance, and offers an approach for researching individuals' emotional and spiritual experience. Because of my cross-religious background, part of my interest in this topic is in whether neuroscientific and psychophysiological perspectives support a position of religious pluralism. Thus, this project strives to be a bridge – an interfaith bridge, as well as a bridge between spiritual practitioners and scientists who are not immersed in the spiritualities and practices they research.

Importance of the Problem

The recent, dramatic increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes in the U.S., as well as the predominance of headlines about various forms of violence based on racial and religious differences, indicate to me that we are in dire need of greater religious understanding and tolerance. The importance of understanding what spirituality means to us and how we experience it, and of applying current neuroscientific, psychophysiological, emotional-experience, and spiritual-experience findings to how we worship, and how we relate to God, ourselves, each other, seems especially pressing today. Accordingly, while this literature review may have the most relevance for religious believers/spiritual practitioners interested in applying neuroscientific, psychophysiological, emotional-experience, and spiritual-experience findings/implications to development of their worship/spiritual practices, it may also have relevance for anyone interested in how we respond to 'other,' i.e., those with whom we hold divergent beliefs.

Work Previously Done in the Field

While both Eastern and Western religions have sacred texts that are central to worship, studies that bring together neuroscience or psychophysiology with engaging sacred text are sparse. Seemingly, neuroscientists have not compared recitation of sacred text in the language associated with worship with recitation in a different language, or compared recitation of the sacred text associated with one's religion with that of a text not associated with one's religion. Much of the research on the intersection between neuroscience, psychophysiology, and religious experience/spirituality has focused on meditation rather than on recitation; of the comparatively scant research done on recitation, much more of that research is associated with the Qur'ān and yoga mantras rather than with the Bible, Torah or Talmud. Further, the majority of research related to recitation of sacred text is about listening to a recitation of sacred text rather than about reciting sacred text. For me, this point about terminology is an important one because many researchers use the term "recitation" to mean "listening to recitation." For purposes of this review, I use the term "recitation" to convey reciting sacred text rather than listening to another person's recitation.

Because of the quantity and the breadth of subject matter of the literature related to the broader topic of neuroscience, psychophysiology, and sacred text, I divided the literature identified in my preliminary bibliography into the following categories: 1) literature that closely relates to the research questions, 2) literature that somewhat relates to the research questions, 3) literature on the general topic of neuroscience, psychophysiology and religious/spiritual experience, and 4) literature that relates to conducting research in this field. For the purposes of this literature review, I limited the review to the first two categories.

Overview of Category 1 Literature (Somewhat related to the topic)

As mentioned previously, Western and Eastern religions alike have sacred texts that are central to worship. Liturgical recitations of scripture are a part of worship for many Christians, especially in monastic traditions. Similarly, Jewish worship is filled with recitations of scripture. Even so, few studies bring together neuroscience with recitation of sacred text. I found one neuroscientific study related to recitation of the Bible, and none related to recitation of the Torah or the Talmud.

One study related to recitation of Buddhist scripture; one related to recitation of a yogic mantra. A summary article reported on scientific studies of meditation on the Hindu sacred syllable *Om*. *Om* is also used as a mantra in other traditions, such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. This article reported on a study comparing “mental chanting” of *Om* with “nontargeted thinking,” concluding that the participants’ heart rates were significantly slowed during meditation in comparison to the control period.¹ Another study was done comparing repetition of *Om* with repetition of “One.”² For this study, breathing and heart rates decreased in both sessions, “but the repetition of *Om* alone reduced the skin resistance, suggesting a subtle change in the mental state, related to the significance of the syllable.”³ This statement is the closest any literature I reviewed comes to my research question about the practitioner’s experience using the language associated with worship in her tradition. In relation to this question, (What do current neuroscientific and psychophysiological studies and understandings say about recitation of sacred text in the language associated with worship in the worshipper’s religion?), I point out the distinction between meditation on a syllable from scripture and reciting passages of scripture.

¹ Sanjay Kumar, H. Nagendra, N. Manjunath, K. Naveen, and Shirley Telles, “Meditation on OM: Relevance from Ancient Texts and Contemporary Science,” *International Journal of Yoga* 3, no. 1 (March 2010): 3.

² Kumar et al., 3.

³ Shirley Telles, R. Nagarathna, H. R. Nagendra, “Autonomic Changes while Mentally Repeating Two Syllables -- One Meaningful and the Other Neutral,” *Indian Journal of Physiology and Pharmacology*, 42 (1998): 57-63). Quoted in Kumar et al., 3.

For me, this type of research further calls attention to the paucity of findings related to recitation of passages of scripture as opposed to meditation on a syllable or image from scripture (or other form of meditation). The findings of the studies related to *Om* is that meditation on *Om* “results in physiological alertness, increased sensitivity as well as synchronicity of certain biorhythms, and an increased sensitivity to sensory transmission.”⁴ In consideration of my first research question (What do current neuroscientific and psychophysiological studies and understandings say about recitation of sacred text, and by extension, what do they say, if anything, about engaging sacred text in the language associated with worship in the worshipper’s religion?), Kumar et al. point in the direction of physiological and psychological well-being gained by engaging sacred text through meditation on a sacred syllable from scripture.

A study I found interesting because of its consideration of multiple religions involved using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to evaluate the neural processing of a Catholic bishop’s response to short sentences from the Bible, the Qur’ān and the Daodejing (Tao Te Ching--the fundamental text for Taoism). There was, however, a difference measured with his reading of the Daodejing compared to reading of the Bible: “Reading statements from the Daodejing resulted in significantly higher activation in the left interior and middle frontal cortices and the left middle temporal gyrus.”⁵ The *cortex* is the brain’s outer surface, consisting of four divisions/lobes: frontal, temporal, parietal, and occipital. The *frontal lobe* comprises about one-half of the upper front of the brain and is associated with planning, empathy, and working memory. The *occipital lobe* comprises the back portion of the brain and is associated with vision. The *parietal lobe* is at the top of the brain between the frontal and occipital lobes

⁴ Kumar et al., 4.

⁵ Sarita Silveira, Yan Bao, Lingyan Wang, Pöppel Ernst, Mihai Avram, Fabian Simmank, Yuliya Zaytseva, and Janusch Blautzik, “Does a Bishop Pray When He Prays? And Does His Brain Distinguish between Different Religions?” *Psych Journal* 4, no. 4 (2015): 199.

and is associated with the sense of space/navigation and the sense of touch, while the *temporal lobe* is the part of the brain beneath the temples associated with speech. A *gyrus* is a ridge on the cerebral cortex. The authors found “no difference in neural activation when the bishop was reading from these statements from the two religions [Christianity and Islam].”⁶ This study also compared the bishop’s praying to his resting, and found no difference between them, from which they conclude that “ritualized activities might be subliminally represented in resting state activities.”⁷

Several studies relate to the physical and emotional effects of listening to recitation of the Qur’ān, as measured by electroencephalography (EEG—measures electrical activity in the brain), electrocardiogram (ECG or EKG—measures electrical activity in the heart), magnetoencephalography (MEG—measures the magnetic fields produced by electrical currents in the brain), the Spielberger State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), or the Circumplex Model of Affect. For example, one such study found that listening to recitation of the Qur’ān “was associated with lower blood pressure, slower heart rate, and smooth muscle relaxation” for both Muslims and non-Muslims.⁸ These studies compare listening to recitation of the Qur’ān to a variety of other activities, such as deep breathing or listening to relaxing music, with varied findings. These studies generally point to the benefits of listening to Qur’ānic recitation, whether in terms of relaxation or positive emotions. For example, a study comparing listening to the Qur’ān to listening to relaxing music found similitude in the ability of both to change negative emotions to positive emotions (Al-Galal et al., 2015).

⁶ Silveira et al., 199.

⁷ Silveira et al., 199.

⁸ A. El-Kadi, “Health and Healing in the Qur’ān,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 2 no. 2 (1985): 291-296. Quoted in Hassan Babamohamadi, Nemat Sotodehasl, Harold G Koenig, Changiz Jahani, and Raheb Ghorbani, “The Effect of Holy Qur’ān Recitation on Anxiety in Hemodialysis Patients: A Randomized Clinical Trial,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 54, no. 5 (2015): 1922.

These studies seem to involve scientifically rigorous application of research protocols; however, some study designs seem questionable. For example, two studies compare listening to recitation of the Qur'ān to listening to “hard music.” In one of these studies the authors used the terms “hard music” and “hard rock music” interchangeably but did not provide an example of “hard music.” The other study described “hard music” as “the song of Wintersun entitled ‘Death and the Healing.’”⁹ The value of applying rigorous protocols to comparing such disparate activities was not stated. The researchers in both studies failed to provide any rationale for their research design. While these studies generally conclude that listening to recitation of sacred text is physiologically and emotionally beneficial, they do not involve any comparison between the efficacy of sacred texts associated with one’s beliefs versus texts not associated with one’s beliefs; they also do not involve any comparison between the language associated with religious worship versus a different language.

⁹ Imad Fakhri Taha Al-Shaikhli, Sabaa Ahmed Yahya, Irma Pammusu, and Khamis Faraj Alarabi, “A Study on the Effects of EEG and ECG Signals While Listening to Qur’ān Recitation” (paper presented at the 2014 5th International Conference on Information and Communication Technology for The Muslim World (ICT4M), Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia, November 17-18, 2014), 2.

Description and Analysis of Category 2 Literature (Most closely related to the topic)

“Effect of Rosary Prayer and Yoga Mantras on Autonomic Cardiovascular Rhythms:
Comparative Study”

This research involved a number of physiological measurements including: 1) recording the electrocardiogram, respiration, and blood pressure at the wrist; 2) recording midcerebral arterial flow velocity by transcranial Doppler ultrasonography; 3) recording spontaneous breathing in three-minute sequences; and 4) recording controlled breathing in six-minute sequences during free talking and during recitation of the Ave Maria in Latin, during repetition of the yogic mantra ‘om-mani-padme-om’, and during six minutes of controlled breathing. The research protocol for the study seems scientifically rigorous as the authors used random order for their recordings, apart from recording controlled breathing last (which makes sense and does not detract from the soundness of the study protocol). To ensure sameness in controlled breathing measurements, the authors used an electronic metronome. They applied spectral analysis to measure the amplitude and frequency of respiratory fluctuations, and assessed gain of spontaneous baroreflex by “dividing the amplitudes of the oscillations in RR interval [variation in the time interval between heart beats] by the corresponding amplitudes of oscillations in systolic blood pressure.” Further, they assessed breathing rates using “the coefficient of variation (standard deviation/mean X 100) of the respiratory rate, during each condition and for each subject.”¹⁰

Curiously, the authors explain that the 23 study participants, who had no previous yoga experience, were instructed in how to recite the yoga mantra, but they offer no explanation as to the experience/instruction of the participants in relation to recitation of the Ave Maria in Latin.

¹⁰ Luciano Bernardi, Peter Sleight, Gabriele Bandinelli, Simone Cencetti, Lamberto Fattorini, Johanna Wdowezye-Szule, and Alfonso Lagi, "Effect of Rosary Prayer and Yoga Mantras on Autonomic Cardiovascular Rhythms: Comparative Study," *British Medical Journal* 323, no. 7327 (December 22-29, 2001): 1447.

Context as a research variable for the Ave Maria reciters does not seem to have been considered as it was not mentioned. The researchers make no mention of any efforts to replicate the worshippers' experience in a church setting where the Ave Maria would normally be performed with the clinical setting; no mention was made of whether the clinical setting involved the call and response between a priest and a congregation associated with the Ave Maria.

The authors found that both recitation of the Ave Maria and repetition of the yoga mantra slowed respiration to around six breaths per minute, which had “a marked effect on synchronization and also increased variability in all cardiovascular rhythms.”¹¹ The effect of the recitation and mantra mirrored the effect of controlled breathing as “the arterial baroreflex sensitivity increased on change from spontaneous breathing to controlled slow breathing at 6/min and from free talking to the Ave Maria, or from free talking to the mantra.”¹² The authors make a connection between the slowed respiration, and concomitant “improve[d] concentration, and induce[d] calm” with the observation that mantras, like the rosary, are typically repeated more than 100 times. The authors use this connection to posit that a goal of recitation/mantra may be “to induce physical, in addition to psychological, changes.”¹³ From here, the authors conclude that “the rosary might be viewed as a health practice as well as a religious practice.”¹⁴

Based on this research, one might conclude that reciting the Ave Maria in Latin and the yogic mantra ‘om-mani-padme-om’ are beneficial for one’s physical health, specifically in relation to heart rate variability and blood pressure. More specifically, however, the authors tie the benefit of both recitations to the slower breathing rate that accompanied the performance of the recitations, which was six breaths per minute. Unfortunately, this study does not address

¹¹ Bernardi et al., 1447.

¹² Bernardi et al., 1448.

¹³ Bernardi et al., 1448.

¹⁴ Bernardi et al., 1448.

either of my research questions specifically. In relation to the second question (How do neuroscientific and psychophysiological perspectives help us – or not – understand and engage sacred text?), this study evaluates the effect of a prayer and a mantra rather than of reciting sacred text (which I have defined as scripture), and it does not look at what is happening in the brain associated with these recitations. In relation to the first question, (What do current neuroscientific and psychophysiological studies and understandings say about recitation of sacred text in the language associated with worship in the worshipper's religion?), while the study participants used sacred language, in this case Latin and Sanskrit, respectively, the study does not include any comparative aspect in relation to the different languages.

That said, the authors' conclusion regarding "rhythm formulas that involve breathing at six breaths per minute" raises the question as to whether other sacred recitations (such as recitation of the Torah in Hebrew, monastic liturgical recitations of the Bible in Latin, Greek or Aramaic, or recitation of the Qur'ān in Arabic), may similarly slow breathing to six breaths per minute. Further, other than the single reference noted above to "calm" and "psychological changes," the authors make no other reference to mental, emotional or spiritual states. I would like to see in this study or in other future studies of a similar nature a survey of each subject's mental/emotional/spiritual state before and after performing the rosary/mantra. The subject's mental/emotional/spiritual experience is just as important, and worthy of being reported, as the subject's blood pressure and heart rate variability, even if they are reflective of each other.

“Functional Brain Mapping during Recitation of Buddhist Scriptures and Repetition of the Namu Amida Butsu: A Study in Experienced Japanese Monks”

This research involved using functional MRI (fMRI) to identify the regions of the brain activated by Shiritori (a Japanese word game in which the players are required to say a word that begins with the final syllable of the previous word), Nenbutsu (chanting the name of the Buddha, thinking on the Buddha, or keeping the Buddha in mind), and Sutra (reciting Buddhist scriptures). In this study, the Nenbutsu involved silently reciting “Namu Amida Butsu” and concentrating on the Buddha; the Sutra involved silently reciting a sutra after the beginning of the sutra was read to the participant via headphones. The study involved four control periods alternated with three activation periods during which the participants kept their eyes closed (for all periods). The rest period involved no external stimuli. The study participants were eight monks who had recited Buddhist scripture for over an hour on a daily basis for at least ten years.

The authors found that the BOLD (blood oxygen level dependent) imaging was significantly different when resting than when chanting, reciting scripture, or playing Shiritori. The Nenbutsu period resulted in a significant activation of the medial prefrontal complex; the Sutra period resulted in activation of the left dorsolateral prefrontal cortices and right parietal cortices; and the Shiritori resulted in activation of the left lateral prefrontal cortices and the bilateral medial prefrontal cortices. The Nenbutsu activated the parts of the brain associated with mental concentration and visuospatial attention, and the Sutra activated the parts of the brain associated with visuospatial attention—both of which are “similar to the areas activated by meditation.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Tsuyoshi Shimomura, Minoru Fujiki, Jotaro Akiyoshi, Takashi Yoshida, Masahisa Tabata, Hiroyuki Kabasawa, and Hidenori Kobayashi, “Functional Brain Mapping during Recitation of Buddhist Scriptures and Repetition of the Namu Amida Butsu: A Study in Experienced Japanese Monks,” *Turkish Neurosurgery* 18, no. 2 (2008): 134.

While the authors do not define “meditation,” they describe it as “one technique which induces the relaxation response.”¹⁶ The authors state the following:

Japanese Buddhists practice in temples, recite Namu Amida Butsu (I take refuge in Amida Buddha) and chant Buddhist scriptures (Sutra) every day. The invocation Namu Amida Butsu (Nenbutsu), voices the hope of rebirth into Amida’s Pure Land. In the Nenbutsu, Buddhists imagine that they are absorbed in to Amida’s Pure Land (19). Therefore, we decided that the Nenbutsu is a form of meditation.¹⁷

In many respects, the research protocol for the study seems scientifically rigorous. The authors used group analysis according to a random effect model to identify the brain regions that showed significant responses during Shitori, Nebutsu, or Sutra as compared to resting. The part of the study protocol I found startling was the duration of the control and activation periods, as it was only 30 seconds. From my experience with chanting and recitation of scripture, I question whether what is happening in the brain 30 seconds after beginning a chant/recitation is the same as what is happening after reciting for a few minutes or longer, especially because I often experience a sense of deepening while chanting or reciting for an extended period. This experience raises the question as to whether the fMRI results would differ if they were taken again after 5 minutes, 15 minutes, 30 minutes, and 60 minutes of recitation. In consideration of the study’s findings, the authors make a related observation, noting that “the relative lack of activation in the Nenbutsu task may derive from the inability to stop and start meditating on a 30s basis.”¹⁸

The authors point out other limitations of the study, such as the difficulty in distinguishing between brain activation associated with the targeted activity versus activation associated with “sub-processes (e.g., internally phonological process or other language-related process),” noting

¹⁶ Shimomura et al., 135.

¹⁷ Yoshiro Tamura, *Japanese Buddhism, A Cultural History* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing, 2000). Quoted in Shimomura et al., 135.

¹⁸ Shimomura et al., 137.

“the possibility that the activated regions may reflect any sub-processes as well as the meditation related processes.”¹⁹ The authors call attention to the limitation of only performing one scan per person with only eight study participants. Further, they mention the limitation of not employing any “subjective measures regarding how successful the meditation was.”²⁰

The authors’ general conclusion is that the areas of the brain activated by Buddhist chanting and scripture recitation are “rather similar to the areas activated by meditation (2, 11).”²¹ As the authors state initially that they see these activities as forms of meditation, this conclusion is not surprising. In relation to my second research question (how do neuroscientific and psychophysiological perspectives help us (or not) understand and engage sacred text?), the study offers the conclusion that brain activation in chanting and recitation is similar to brain activation in meditation. From this conclusion, the reader can extrapolate that, in terms of brain activation, chanting/recitation and meditation seem to be more or less equal in their effects on the brain. Based on this similarity, one might consider that worshippers of religions with sacred texts are well-advised to engage in sacred chanting/recitation, just as spiritual practitioners associated with meditative traditions not associated with sacred texts are well-advised to meditate. In relation to the first question (What do current neuroscientific and psychophysiological studies and understandings say about recitation of sacred text and what do they say about engaging sacred text in the language associated with worship in the worshipper’s religion?), while the study participants used a Japanese pronunciation of Sanskrit, the study does not include any

¹⁹ Shimomura et al., 140.

²⁰ Shimomura et al., 141.

²¹ Marcia Barinaga, “Studying the Well-trained Mind,” *Science* 302 (2003):44-46 and H.C. Lou, T.W. Kjaer, L. Friberg, G. Wildschiodtz, S. Holm, M. Nowak, “A 150-H2O PET Study of Meditation and the Resting State of Normal Consciousness,” *Human Brain Mapping* 7 (1999): 98-105. Quoted in Shimomura et al., 137.

comparative aspect in relation to language associated with religious worship versus a different language.

As with the study of the Ave Maria and yoga mantra, I would like to see in studies of this nature a survey of each subject's mental/emotional/spiritual state before and after performing the chanting/recitation. As the authors' alluded to by noting the limitation of not having any indication as to the "success" of the mediation, the participant's mental/emotional/spiritual experience is just as important, and worthy of being reported, as the subject's brain activation, even if they are reflective of each other.

"Neural Correlates of Religious Experience"

This research involved using functional neuroimaging to identify the regions of the brain activated in religious experience, specifically in reading silently/reciting Psalm 23:1 (presumably in German). This activity was compared with other tasks involving reading silently/reciting a nursery rhyme and phone card instructions, all of which were measured with positron-emission tomography (PET) imaging. The study participants were twelve adults, six of whom self-identified as religious and six of whom self-identified as non-religious. Each participant was scanned six times with ten minutes between scans and completed the Positive Affect Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) (Watson et al., 1988)²² before and after each scan.

The study participants who self-identified as religious also self-identified whether they attained a "religious state" (term not defined by the authors) during the study. The religious

²² D. Watson, L.A. Clark and A. Tellegen, "Development and Validation of Brief Measure of Positive and Negative Affect: The PANAS Scales," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54 (1988): 1063-1070. Quoted in Nina P. Azari, Janpeter Nickel, Gilbert Wunderlich, Michael Niedeggen, Harald Hefter, Lutz Tellmann, Hans Herzog, Petra Stoerig, Dieter Birnbacher, and Rüdiger J. Seitz, "Neural Correlates of Religious Experience," *European Journal of Neuroscience* 13, no. 8 (2001): 1650.

participants “showed a trend toward decreased negative affect during the religious state [PANAS scores for religious subject in the ‘religious-recite’ condition] ... No other task condition showed changed PANAS values in these subjects, and the non-religious subjects showed no changes in PANAS values.”²³ The PET scans of these participants revealed activation of the frontal-parietal circuit, composed of the dorsolateral prefrontal, dorsomedial frontal and medial parietal cortex. As previous studies demonstrated that these areas of the brain “play a profound role in sustaining reflexive evaluation and thought,” the authors conclude that religious experience “may be a cognitive process which, nonetheless, feels immediate.”²⁴

The research protocol for the study seems scientifically rigorous in selection of participants as the religious and non-religious participants did not differ significantly in terms of imaginability, verbal traits, personality or life satisfaction measures. The authors took measures to ensure that the study participants were “fully engaged in the task by the start of the scan, and that all subjects were engaged in the same stimulus material during a given task condition.”²⁵ While task order always placed rest first, and reading before reciting, the other tasks were randomized. The authors note that “a challenge for future work will be to explore transient religious states and the evolution of other varieties of religious experience. It may turn out that ‘religious experience’ can be divided eventually into a variety of subprocesses, as has been, for example, the case with memory.”²⁶

Of the literature reviewed, this study comes the closest to addressing my second research question (how do neuroscientific and psychophysiological perspectives help us (or not) understand and engage sacred text?), in that it specifically involves identifying areas of brain

²³ Azari et al., 1651.

²⁴ Azari et al., 1649.

²⁵ Azari et al., 1650.

²⁶ Azari et al., 1652.

activation during recitation of sacred text. The study also provides the perspective that the experience of recitation for these participants seemed to be a cognitive experience rather than an emotional one. The authors note that the participants' religious experience "did not involve activation of limbic areas [of the brain], although the religious subjects were positively affected by the recital of Psalm 23."²⁷ Presumably, the authors are referring here to the PANAS scores reflecting a decreased negative affect. They go on to say that "the religious experience was not an emotional experience, nor an arousal comparable to that of the happy state which we observed in the non-religious subjects."²⁸ These findings are certainly curious, given common assumptions about the positive affective experience of religious practices; they raise the question as to how the participants experienced both a positive affect and no activation of the limbic areas of the brain, and encourage a closer look at the areas of the brain that are activated in others' religious practices. The study also offers the perspective that as the participants' religious experience seems to activate a pre-established neural circuit involved in the participants' "religious schema," and that as the participants' self-identify their religious experience, the participants self-reinforce their own schema.²⁹ This observation, in combination with consideration of the observation that the non-religious participants showed no changes in PANAS values, could lead the reader to a physiological basis for respecting our differences in beliefs and experience. In relation to the first question (What do current neuroscientific and psychophysiological studies and understandings say about recitation of sacred text in the language associated with worship in the worshipper's religion?), the authors indicate that the study participants spoke German; there

²⁷ Azari et al., 1651-1652.

²⁸ Azari et al., 1652.

²⁹ Azari et al., 1651.

is no indication that any part of the study related to using a language particularly associated with religious worship.

Originality and Contributions

As previously mentioned, both Eastern and Western religions have sacred texts that are central to worship. Even so, studies that bring together neuroscience or psychophysiology with engaging sacred text are sparse. Seemingly, researchers have not compared recitation of sacred text in the language associated with religious worship with recitation in a different language, or compared recitation of the sacred text associated with one's religion with that of a text not associated with one's religion. Much of the research on the intersection between neuroscience, psychophysiology, and religious experience/spirituality has focused on meditation rather than on recitation; of the comparatively scant research done on recitation, much more of that research is associated with the Qur'ān and yoga mantras rather than on the Bible, Torah or Talmud. Further, most of the research related to recitation of sacred text is about listening to a recitation of sacred text rather than about reciting sacred text. This research often focuses on neuroscience rather than on psychophysiology. While some of this research does include measures of the participants' emotional experience, much of it does not do so, and much of it makes no attempt to gather the participants' report of their spiritual experience. In other words, a practice that is central to the spiritual formation of many has not been well-researched. Thus, by exploring what spirituality is and how it has been experienced – as revealed in the writings of a prominent and influential figure from the Islamic and Christian traditions, and in the emotional and spiritual experience of individuals who volunteered to engage in sacred text practices – this project points out the need for research that includes neuroscientific, psychophysiological, emotional-

experience, and spiritual-experience measures. This project illuminates dimensions of spiritual experience that should be explored, offering scientists appropriate questions for their research.

After evaluating database searches that identified more than 5,000 articles potentially related to my research topic, only three of those were closely related, and only 11 were somewhat related. Review of those articles calls further attention to the paucity of findings related to recitation of passages of scripture as opposed to the various forms of meditation. Accordingly, research involving a worshipper's experience of sacred texts associated with one's beliefs and texts not associated with one's beliefs may have great potential benefit for cross-religious applications in today's world.

Chapter 2

Overview of Spiritual Formation in Christianity and Islam

Defining Spirituality Generally and Personally

What is spirituality? That was the question I asked myself when I came across a study on late-in-life happiness. I was working in the field of long-term care at the time, and was curious that this study identified the participants' having some form of spirituality in their lives as the strongest determining factor in their level of happiness. As I had recently experienced a significant loss that seemed to follow a long list of personal tragedies, my interest was piqued. I had a vague idea that spirituality had to do with religion, but I was not sure what 'spirituality' meant. I had no awareness that professors of spiritual formation, like Andrew Dreitcer, have addressed the question of describing spirituality with definitions like this one: "One's spirituality is one's manner or style of intimacy with (or relating to) what one considers ultimately Sacred (or of ultimate concern).' – OR '...one's manner or style of practicing the Presence of Ultimate Mystery (or however you might characterize this elusive 'Goodness Beyond Being')." ³⁰ I had no awareness that theologians like David P. Perrin had thoughtfully explored different aspects of spirituality, from how it is marketed to how it is lived in everyday life. Likewise, I was unaware that some theologians had carefully defined spirituality in such a way as to be inclusive of but not exclusive to belief in God, as in the following definition from Perrin: "Spirituality as lived experienced can be defined as conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives." ³¹

³⁰ Andrew Dreitcer, "Notes on 'Spirituality and Spirituality Studies'" (Handout received in Christian Spiritualities Across the Ages with Professor Andrew Dreitcer, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California, Jan. 22, 2017), 1.

³¹ David B. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 20.

At the time, carrying the wounds of the exclusivist Christianity of my childhood, such inclusive definitions would have been exactly what was needed. Yet, as the often-misquoted saying goes – the Lord works in mysterious ways. The mystery began to unfold shortly thereafter when a coworker introduced me to *tasawwuf* (Islamic Sufism). Years later I have no idea how the researchers were defining spirituality for the purposes of their study, but I now have some idea about how I would define spirituality based on years of experience as a student of Islamic Sufism. Today, if someone were to ask me ‘What is spirituality?’ I would respond with something along the lines of – ‘spirituality, for me, is the process by which we travel through our hearts and souls to remind ourselves of and actualize in our lives the truth of who we are, the truth of the divine fragrance/breath within us; the journey of returning to our divine origin through learning to know and love ourselves, learning to know and love and be of service to the creation as contingent manifestations of God’s infinite outpouring of love, and learning to know, love, and worship God in every face and in every place.’

My Spiritual Theology (what about God allows for connection with humans)

As a means of guiding exploration and discussion of different spiritualities, Dreitcer uses the term “Spiritual Theology or Spiritual Metaphysic” to describe “what it is about the nature of the Sacred, Ultimate Concern, G-D that allows it to be intimately engaged by or accessible to humans (or, particularly, to you).”³² In addressing what about God allows for connection with humans, I believe, as do many Sufis, that God described Himself as a hidden treasure that loved to be known and that the creation is an expression of God’s manifestation of love of Himself. In Sufism, this manifesting expression of love includes all the creation because only God is truly

³² Dreitcer, “Notes on ‘Spirituality and Spirituality Studies,’” 4.

existent, i.e., there is nothing other than Him. (In Arabic the masculine form is inclusive of both male and female; there is no assignment of gender to God by use of the masculine form because “there is nothing like unto Him” (Qur’ān 112:4).³³) In brief, this idea -- of God and all His manifestations as an outpouring of love, all connected by an electricity-like circuitry of love in which everything is God’s revelation of Himself -- best captures my personal spiritual theology.

My Spiritual Anthropology (what about humans allows for connection with God)

Just as Dreitcer uses the term “Spiritual Theology or Spiritual Metaphysic” as a means of guiding exploration and discussion of different spiritualities, he also uses the term “Spiritual Anthropology,” which he describes as “what it is about the nature of humans (or your nature) that allows for intimate engagement with the Sacred, Ultimate Concern, G-D.”³⁴ In speaking to what about humans allows for connection with God, I turn to a central concept in Islam, that of *fitra* – that each human being is created with a primordial nature of innate purity, goodness and belief in God, but that lower desires, like the desires to eat, sleep, etc., as well as most of life’s experiences, create veils over that primordial nature. The human life is then about remembering this truth, unveiling it, and increasingly living it in accordance with the degree of one’s unveiling and concomitant purity of heart. Further, another central concept in Islam is that God is as He has described Himself in the Qur’ān with His divine names, such as the All Knowing, the Most Merciful, the Loving, the Giver of Life, etc., and that each human is a contingent reflection of God’s attributes, each a unique reflection of these names. Also, as the human being can embody all the forms of worship present in the creation, the human is uniquely made to know, love, and

³³ Unless otherwise noted, all Qur’an references are to the Muḥammad Asad, trans., *The Message of the Qur’ān* (London: The Book Foundation, 2003).

³⁴ Dreitcer, “Notes on ‘Spirituality and Spirituality Studies,’” 4.

worship God in a progressive loss of self and realization of the divine essence within. As of this writing, I am especially struck by the state of humanity's contingency, i.e., that we all will die, and that as part of our temporal nature we live in a situation of utter dependence on God, and awareness of that utter neediness is a gift from God by which we are reminded to be focused on Him, the Eternal and Self-subsisting God. In other words, I find that awareness of my neediness is a means of receptivity to reliance on God and knowledge of God.

My Experience of Shadhiliyya Sufism

The school, or order, of Sufism the coworker introduced me to is the Shadhiliyya school as taught by Shaykh Muḥammad Sa'id al-Jamal al-Rifa'i ash-Shadhuli. Ahmad Zarrūq, who was a prominent legal, theoretical, and spiritual Islamic scholar, described the Shadhiliyyah school of Sufism as "the one order founded wholly on the principle of giving up self-will before God's commandments."³⁵ Sufism as I have experienced it with Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa'i's teachings is a path that emphasizes heart-awareness, i.e., monitoring the 'turning' of the heart, and heart-management, i.e., intentionally cultivating that which increases a person's readiness and receptivity to the gift of gnosis (knowledge). Accordingly, the experience of divine connection is a heart-felt experience – I literally feel the turning, opening, and constricting of my heart, as well as the strength of my spiritual connection to my spiritual guide, may Allah be pleased with him, and the Prophet Muḥammad, blessings and peace be upon him. Also, as I 'travel' deeply, I feel an increasing subtlety in moving into the soul, which I experience as being a more refined sense behind the heart of the physical body. Over time, worship increasingly fills the heart with the light of God, the heart becomes more occupied with remembering God, and the heart becomes

³⁵ Ahmad ibn Ahmad Zarrūq and Zaineb S. Istrabadi, "The Principles of Sūfism (Qawā'id Al-Taṣawwuf): An Annotated Translation with Introduction," (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1988), 35.

absent from distractions, including and ‘beyond’ the point at which a person finds herself in remembrance of the unifying name Allah, or other divine names, or sacred recitations during sleep, etc.

The deepest spiritual experience I have had as a student of Shadhiliyya Sufism is difficult to identify from amongst many experiences and is difficult to express. I would liken it to feeling the physical boundaries of self and body fading into a sense of energetic waves, of a loss of ‘I-ness’ in an overwhelming sense of there being nothing other than Love. In my experience, how far a student has reached on this journey is evidenced by the extent to which she is loving, merciful, and compassionate with all of creation, which can be demonstrated in a myriad of ways, such as kindness to animals, aiding those who are experiencing poverty or other needs, working for social justice, etc. All of which is to say, I have a long way to go.

Defining Islamic Spirituality

Before broaching the subject of a definition of Islamic spirituality, one should know that like other religions, there are many different denominations and schools of thought in Islam and Islamic Sufism. The many different sects of Islam and Sufi orders across the world and their various perspectives render defining Islamic spirituality in a universally agreed upon way impossible. Many scholars define Islamic spirituality in terms of the development of Sufism within an Islamic context. For example, in *Early Islamic Mysticism*, Islamic history and literature scholar Michael Sells describes the “four phases of Islamic spirituality” as “the pre-Sufi phase,” “the early period of Sufism,” “the formative phase of Sufi literature,” and “the Sufi synthetic works of the seventh century of Islam.”³⁶ However, many Muslims define Islamic spirituality in

³⁶ Michael A. Sells, “Introduction,” in *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur’ān, Mi’raj, Poetic and Theological Writing*, trans. and ed. Michael A. Sells (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 17-18.

a way that fits their position, i.e., whether they are Sunni or Shi'a, what Sunni or Shi'a school they follow (Hanafi, Malik, Hanbali, Ja'fari, Zaidi, etc.), how 'traditional' they are, and so on. That said, I should state at the outset that my consideration of defining the term 'Islamic spirituality' is informed by my experience of Islamic Sufism. Many Sufis describe Sufism as "the heart of Islam."³⁷ Some scholars and laypersons (both Islamic and otherwise) hold this view, i.e., that Sufism is an integral part of Islam. For example, Ahmad Zarrūq viewed Sufi orders as "one of the mainstays of the spiritual life of Islam."³⁸ The late professor of Arabic language and literature Victor Danner stated that "Sufism can be defined as Islamic spirituality, that is to say, it has to do with the life of the Spirit in an immediate sense, and as such it has to do with the *tariqah*, which means generically the spiritual Path."³⁹ Danner's description is not to say that Sufis do not follow the sacred Law; rather, it is to say that Sufis follow sacred Law *as part of* "the spiritual Path." Sufism requires observance of "the prescriptions of the exoteric Law ... [and of] the discipline of the Path, which has as its goal the salvific love and knowledge of God."⁴⁰ In other words, Sufism attends to the esoteric aspects of Islam but does not do so to the exclusion of its exoteric aspects.

Islamic studies scholar Carl W. Ernst calls attention to the opinion that "spirituality, as Michael Sells points out, has been a basic aspect of Islamic religious practice."⁴¹ Sells discusses the spirituality inherent in the pillars of Islam. For example, of the ritual prayer, Sells writes the following: "The physical movements (*rak'as*) of ritual prayer enact the simultaneous orientation of all worshippers – body and spirit – toward the center point of the Ka'ba in Mecca and

³⁷ Victor Danner, "Introduction," in Ibn 'Aṭā' Illāh *The Book of Wisdom* Kwaja Abdullah Anṣārī *Intimate Conversations*, trans. Victor Danner and W. M Thackston (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 14.

³⁸ Zarrūq, 1.

³⁹ Victor Danner, "Introduction," *The Book of Wisdom*, 9.

⁴⁰ Victor Danner, "Introduction," *The Book of Wisdom*, 6.

⁴¹ Carl W. Ernst, "Preface," in *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'ān, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writing*, trans. and ed. Michael A. Sells (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 2.

harmonize the body and spirit within that orientation.”⁴² This same argument of a spiritual nature inherent to the outer religious observances of Islam could easily be made for the Qur’ān itself. Not only does the Arabic word for the spirit (*ar-rūḥ*) (روح) occurs 21 times in the Qur’ān, this connection between an outer action and a corresponding inner spiritual truth could easily be made for all Qur’ānic passages and topics, such as the creation, the stories of the prophets, divine unity, and the day of judgment. This combination of an outer and inner aspect is a recurrent theme in discussions of Sufism. Author and lecturer Doug Marman references this both-ness, i.e., both the outer religion and the inner spiritual path, in his explanation of the 13th century Islamic Sufi scholar and poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī’s use of the term Islam: “When Rumi refers to Islam, he is talking about The Way. He is not talking about the preconceived notions that people have about Islam today, or even in his day, but the spiritual path itself and the religious tradition.”⁴³ Even so, some Muslims view Sufism as heretical. Some countries have gone so far as to make Sufi organizations illegal and to make certain practices associated with Sufism illegal, like visiting the tomb of a saint. This ongoing discourse about Sufism has likely been affected by the emergence of Sufi orders, especially in Europe and the United States, that have embraced, to varying degrees, followers who do not convert to Islam and do not perform the religious observances that are considered obligatory by Muslims.

My preference for describing Islamic spirituality by its characteristics rather than in a concise, general definition is inevitably informed by being a student of Shadhiliyya Sufism and convert to Islam who endeavors to follow the Shafi’i school of Sunni jurisprudence.

Accordingly, I will not try to define what Islamic spirituality is for a Shi’a Muslim, a

⁴² Michael A. Sells trans. and ed., *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur’ān, Mi’raj, Poetic and Theological Writing*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 13.

⁴³ Doug Marman, “Introduction,” in *It Is What It Is: The Personal Discourses of Rumi (or Fihi Ma Fihi)*, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (Ridgefield, WA: Spiritual Dialogues Project, 2010), xvi.

Wahhabi/Salafi, etc. To be clear, I do not have a strong sense of identity tied to the Shafi'i school verses the other schools; likewise, I do not have a strong sense of identity tied to being a Sunni Muslim verses a Shi'a Muslim. In fact, I am aligned with Sunni Islam in the importance I place on following the example of the Prophet Muḥammad, may Allah's blessings and peace be upon him, while deeply appreciative of Shi'a Islam in the immense esteem in which I hold 'Alī ibn 'Abī Ṭālib (the cousin and son-in-law of Muḥammad) as the spiritual father of those who serve as guides for the path of Islamic spirituality and the 'doorway' to gnosis and the essence of *Al-Haqq* (The Truth).

That said, describing Islamic spirituality by its characteristics requires emphasizing that it is Islamic, i.e., it adheres to the tenets of Islam and is grounded in the Holy Qur'ān and in *ḥadīth*, a report or account of the words or deeds of the Prophet Muḥammad, may Allah's blessings and peace be upon him. Even if an obvious and unnecessary statement to some, this emphasis on the Islamic nature of Islamic spirituality must be established as the groundwork from which further definition may emerge. For me, the starting point for defining Islamic spirituality lies in the following *ḥadīth* that comes from *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, a collection of Sunni *ḥadīth* by Muslim b. al-Hajjaj:

It was narrated on the authority of Umar (may Allah be pleased with him), who said: "While we were one day sitting with the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him), there appeared before us a man dressed in extremely white clothes and with very black hair. No traces of journeying were visible on him, and none of us knew him. He sat down close by the Prophet (peace be upon him), rested his knee against his thighs, and said, 'O Muḥammad! Inform me about Islam.' The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said, 'Islam is that you should testify that there is no deity except Allah and that Muḥammad is His Messenger, that you should perform salah, pay the Zakah, fast during Ramadan, and perform Hajj to the House, if you are able to do so.' The man said, 'You have spoken truly.' We were astonished at his questioning him (the Messenger) and telling him that he was right, but he went on to say, 'Inform me about iman.'

He (the Messenger of Allah) answered, ‘It is that you believe in Allah and His angels and His Books and His Messengers and in the Last Day, and in *qadar* (fate), both in its good and in its evil aspects.’ He said, ‘You have spoken truly.’ Then he (the man) said, ‘Inform me about Ihsan.’ He (the Messenger of Allah) answered, ‘It is that you should serve Allah as though you could see Him, for though you cannot see Him yet (know that) He sees you.’ He said, ‘Inform me about the Hour.’ He (the Messenger of Allah) said, ‘About that, the one questioned knows no more than the questioner.’ So he said, ‘Well, inform me about the signs thereof.’ He said, ‘They are that the slave-girl will give birth to her mistress, that you will see the barefooted, naked, destitute, the herdsmen of the sheep (competing with each other) in raising lofty buildings.’ Thereupon the man went off. I waited a while, and then he (the Messenger of Allah) said, ‘O Umar, do you know who that questioner was?’ I replied, ‘Allah and His Messenger know better.’ He said, ‘That was Jibril (the Angel Gabriel). He came to teach you your religion.’”⁴⁴

This *ḥadīth* begins with the Prophet Muḥammad’s description of *islam*, which means submission to the will of God. This sort of surrender is exemplified in Qur’ān 6:162-163: “Say: ‘Behold, my prayer, and [all] my acts of worship, and my living and my dying are for God [alone], the Sustainer of all the worlds, in whose divinity none has a share: for thus have I been bidden – and I shall [always] be foremost among those who surrender themselves unto Him.’” The *ḥadīth* answers the question ‘what is Islam’ by stating that Islam is observing the tenets known as the five pillars of Islam – the testimony of faith (*shahādah*), the ritual prayers (*ṣalāt* or *salah*), charity (*zakat*), fasting during the month of Ramadan (*sawm*), and the pilgrimage (*hajj*). The first two require some elucidation as they establish themes that recur in defining Islamic spirituality, such as God’s oneness, God’s existence as real and eternal as opposed to the human’s existence as illusory and ephemeral, and the spiritual journey as being one in which the human’s selfhood becomes extinguished.

The *shahādah* takes the form of saying ‘There is no God but God and Muḥammad is His messenger (*lā ilaha illa-llāh Muḥammadun rasūlu-llāh*). This testimony of faith is the

⁴⁴ “Hadith 2: Islam, Iman, Ihsan,” 40 *Hadith Nawawi.com A Resource Website to Learn & Study: The 40 Hadith Compiled by Imam Nawawi* (2013), accessed May 18, 2019, <https://40hadithnawawi.com/index.php/the-hadiths/hadith-2>.

foundation of Islam and Islamic Sufism; Zarrūq wrote, “The creedal belief of all Sufis is that of the forefathers of Islam.”⁴⁵ In explanation of its meaning, contemporary Islamic studies scholar William C. Chittick writes, “This testimony of faith is composed of two parts. The first part, “no god” (*lā ilaha*) is the “affirmation” (*ithbāt*). First the *shahādah* negates the world, then it affirms the existence of God. It signifies that nothing is real but the Real. Everything we see and imagine as real is a false reality, a false divinity; and beyond all these things and all vision and imagination is the true Reality, the One God. ‘There is no god but He: All things perish, except His Face’ (Koran XXVIII 88).”⁴⁶ Chittick’s explanation voices a concept that is central to Islam, that of God’s oneness (*tawḥīd*). This principle occurs in various forms of repeating that there is only one god, such as in the following verses:

- “GOD – there is no deity save Him, the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsistent Fount of All Being” (Qur’ān 2:255);
- “Say: ‘He is the One God: God the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of All That Exists’” (Qur’ān 112:1-2); and
- “And God’s is the east and the west: and wherever you turn, there is God’s countenance” (Qur’ān 2:115).

English Islamic scholar Martin Lings says of *tawḥīd*: “The doctrine of Oneness of Being means that what the eye sees and the mind records is an illusion, and that every apparently separate and finite thing is in Truth the Presence of the One Infinite.”⁴⁷

Observation of these five pillars is the foundation of Islamic spirituality, and all of the pillars convey the idea of a spiritual journey that can be described as “the inward deepening or

⁴⁵ Zarrūq, 34.

⁴⁶ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teaching of Rūmī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 181.

⁴⁷ Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 65.

ebbing of the finite self in the direction of its Divine Principle.”⁴⁸ To embark on this journey, the human being must first have faith (*iman*), such as that described in Qur’ān 2:285: “The Apostle, and the believers with him, believe in what has been bestowed upon him from on high by his Sustainer: they all believe in God, and His angels, and His revelations, and His apostles, making no distinction between any of His apostles; and they say: ‘We have heard, and we pay heed. Grant us Thy forgiveness, O our Sustainer, for with Thee is all journeys’ end!’” This faith is not only belief in God, angels, God’s revelations in the holy books (the Torah revealed to Moses, the Psalms revealed to David, the Gospel revealed to Jesus, and the Qur’ān revealed to Muḥammad), it is also belief in the “Last Day.” Belief in the Last Day, or the Day of Judgment, is so imperative that Rūmī wrote that “the spirit of all the sciences is only this: to know who you will be on the Day of Resurrection.”⁴⁹

Faith (*iman*) is the requirement for embarking on the journey. To reach the desired end, one must have spiritual excellence (*ihsan*) – to be imbued with a consciousness of God – with an awareness that in every moment, even if you do not see God, God sees you. This part of the *ḥadīth* is key to Islamic Sufis because it uniquely speaks to an inner reality beyond the outward observances of the religion, and it uniquely speaks to their goal. In his *Qawā'id al-Taṣawwuf* (The Principles of Sufism), Ahmad Zarrūq states that Sufism is “based on the station of spiritual virtue (*ihsan*)” and that this virtue is reached via religious observance (including litanies and invocations), asceticism, and gnosis.⁵⁰ For Zarrūq, this spiritual excellence requires “conforming to the virtues laid down in the Qur’ān and the *sunnah*, [and] can only be perfected under the guidance of a shaykh.”⁵¹ In pointing out the commonalities of Ibn ‘Ata’illah (Tāj al-Dīn Abū'l-

⁴⁸ Lings, 29.

⁴⁹ Chittick, 128.

⁵⁰ Zarrūq, 33.

⁵¹ Zarrūq, 34.

Faḍl Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī al-Shādhilī – a jurist and early leader of the Shadhiliyya Sufi order) and Kwaja Abdullah Ansari (Abu Isma‘il *Abdullah* al-Herawi al-*Ansari* -- known as an 11th century Sufi saint), the late Islamic studies professor Annemarie Schimmel described the Sufi’s goal as “the realization of the experience of the Divine already in this life, not only at the Day of Judgment.”⁵² Danner described Sufism’s goal as gnosis, which he described as follows: “loving knowledge of God or a knowing love of Him ... this is what the Sufis mean by *ma’rifah*, or ‘gnosis.’”⁵³ The gnostic then is one “who possesses perfect knowledge and love of the divine Absolute called *Allah*.”⁵⁴

The desired end of the spiritual journey in Islamic spirituality has been described in a variety of ways. Sells describes it in terms of an end to the illusion of separation in the absorption of what is truly real – God’s oneness: “Separation is witnessing of others-than-God, Most Glorious and Sublime. Union is witnessing the others through God. Union of union is the utter perishing and passing away of all perception of any other-than-God, Most Glorious and Sublime, through the onslaughts of reality.”⁵⁵ Sells also describes that union in terms of the human’s affirmation of God’s oneness in returning to his state before contingent manifestation and the illusion of separation: “The emblem of that affirmation of unity is the return of the lastness of the godservant to his firstness, that he might be as he was when he was before he was.”⁵⁶ Also speaking in terms of the human returning to his original state, French scholar Tayeb Chourief describes the mission of the Prophet Muḥammad, blessings and peace be upon him, and the goal of his *sunna* (teachings and example) as “offer[ing] the spiritual means for the

⁵² Annemarie Schimmel, “Preface,” in Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Illāh *The Book of Wisdom* Kwaja Abdullah Anṣārī *Intimate Conversations*, trans. Victor Danner and W. M Thackston (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), xiii.

⁵³ Victor Danner, “Introduction,” *The Book of Wisdom*, 11.

⁵⁴ Victor Danner, “Introduction,” *The Book of Wisdom*, 12.

⁵⁵ Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur’an, Mi’raj, Poetic and Theological Writing* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 118.

⁵⁶ Sells, 256.

purification of the soul until the soul rediscovers the beauty inherent in its creation: the primordial nature (*fiṭra*) of man which everyone carries within.”⁵⁷ Lings describes this return as an absorption in the divine reality, as “the reintegration of the fragmented finite individual self into the Infinitude of the Divine Self.”⁵⁸ For Lings, this absorption is the Sufis goal: “The supreme aim of Sufism is to be ‘breathed in’ by God and reabsorbed and therefore not subsequently ‘breathed out.’”⁵⁹

The absorption and union that is the desired end of the spiritual journey in Islamic spirituality has also been described in terms of annihilation (*fanā*’), extinction of the ego- or lower-self, such as that referenced in Qur’ān 55:26-27: “All that lives on earth or in the heavens is bound to pass away: but forever will abide thy Sustainer’s Self, full of majesty and glory” – and in terms of subsistence in the Eternal (*baqā*’), the state in which “not as himself but as the Self that one who has been extinguished can be said to subsist.”⁶⁰ In relation to the definition of spiritual excellence as an instruction to believers to “worship God as if you see Him,” Chourief also describes reaching this state as a *fanā*’ – “in order to see God everywhere, one must not see oneself anymore.”⁶¹ In his commentary on this *ḥadīth*, the scholar and theologian ‘Abd al-Karīm ibn Hūzān Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī al-Naysābūrī, famous for his Qur’ānic commentary, *ḥadīth* teachings, and defense of Sufism, wrote that “when one removes the illusion of multiplicity, one’s being realizes subsistence through the Divine Attributes. Whoever is dominated by the Truth to the point of no longer seeing the creatures in their limitations, has realized extinction before creatures and subsistence in the Truth.... (*Risāla*, pp. 67-68).”⁶² Sells explains this *fanā*’

⁵⁷ Tayeb Chourief, *Spiritual Teachings of the Prophet* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 1.

⁵⁸ Lings, 37.

⁵⁹ Lings, 41.

⁶⁰ Lings, 78.

⁶¹ Chourief, 39.

⁶² Chourief, 39-40.

to *baqā'* process, the process in which the ego dissolves progressively, as entailing three successive *fanā'*s, i.e., three successive annihilations:

The first [annihilation or extinction of the ego-self] is the passing away from the [human] attributes, qualities, and dispositions.... The second is the passing away from attention to one's share of the sweet deserts and pleasure of obedience: through the perfect accord of the quest for the real for yourself in cutting you off (*inqitā'ika*) for him; that there might be no intermediary between you and him. The third passing away is the passing away of yourself from the vision of the reality: passing away from your ecstasies (*mawājīd*) as the sign of the real overpowers you. At that moment you both pass away and abide, and are found truly existent in your passing away; through the found existence (*wujūd*) of your other; upon the abiding of your trace in the disappearance of your name.⁶³

Sells also reframes this last stage of abiding existence through dissolution as the extinction of self-witnessing: "Then there is a person's passing away from witnessing his own passing away through his perishing in the ecstatic existentiality (*wujūd*) of the real."⁶⁴

How does the human develop the sort of consciousness of God that achieves such an end to the journey? Like Zarrūq, who described the purpose of Sufism as "the purification of the heart,"⁶⁵ the Sufi would answer that the purpose and the process are the same. In other words, the purpose, purification, is also the process, purification. Chittick addresses this topic, saying, "Man's task in this world is to cleanse his heart, to polish it, and ultimately to make of it a perfect mirror reflecting God."⁶⁶ In addressing the question 'What is Sufism?', Lings writes that "the first part of the answer is that the Divine Name must take the place of the veiled Heart, and a movement towards it must be set up in the soul to counteract the pull of the outer world so that the lost harmony can be regained."⁶⁷ Sufi saint Rābi' al-Adawīyya speaks similarly: "The wakeful heart is one that has lost itself in the real."⁶⁸

⁶³ Sells, 255.

⁶⁴ Sells, 121.

⁶⁵ Zarrūq, 33.

⁶⁶ Chittick, 39.

⁶⁷ Lings, 82.

⁶⁸ Sells, 163-164.

Why this emphasis on the human heart? In part, because in traveling the path of love the heart is the primary vehicle by which the human comes closer to and reaches God; the human travels to God through feeling more than through reason as the human needs to feel connection to God and to experience a sense of God's love. To do so, the heart needs purification from its human qualities, from everything that is 'other than God.' As Lings explains it, when the heart and soul is purified of other than God, the human's original nature as created in the image of God is revealed: "According to Islamic doctrine, Perfection is a synthesis of the Qualities of Majesty and Beauty; and Sufism, as many Sufi have expressed it, is a putting on of these Divine Qualities, which means divesting the soul of the limitations of fallen man, the habits and prejudices which have become 'second nature', and investing it with the characteristics of man's primordial nature, made in the image of God."⁶⁹ Lings' explanation is evocative of Qur'ān 30:30: "And so, set thy face steadfastly towards the [one ever-true] faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition which God has instilled into man: [for] not to allow any change to corrupt what God has thus created – this is the [purpose of the one] ever-true faith...." In other words, the path of love is the path of maintaining that which God already gave the human; it is the path of preserving and protecting *fitra*, the innate goodness with which God created the human, which is God's image.

Continuing with the idea of the arrival at the spiritual journey's end actually being a return to the beginning, Lings makes an important point about this process of unveiling in referring to it as gradual: "The path of the mystics is a *gradual awakening* [emphasis added] as it were 'backwards' in the direction of the root of one's being, a remembrance of the Supreme Self which infinitely transcends the human ego and which is none other than the Deep towards which

⁶⁹ Lings, 18.

the wave ebbs.”⁷⁰ Understanding the purification of the human heart and soul as a gradual process is, in fact, supported by the Qur’ān: “[even thus, O men,] are you bound to move onward from stage to stage” (84:19). The human journey is one of both obvious outer stages – birth, childhood, adolescence, puberty, adulthood, the physical and intellectual decline associated with becoming elderly – and less obvious inner stages of spiritual development. Several verses (*ayats*) specifically describe these inner stages of human development along the spiritual journey. Qur’ān 12:53 describes the first stage in which the human is characterized as having a commanding self (*nafs al-ammara*) [“for verily, man’s inner self does incite [him] to evil”]. Islamic counselors Sabnum Dharamsi and Abdullah Maynard describe the human at this point as being “childish, base, egotistical.”⁷¹ My spiritual guide, Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa’i, described the human at this stage as characterized by “ignorance, greed, arrogance, conceit, anger, evil, envy ... harming others with his tongue or hand,” and being ruled by lower desires.⁷² Qur’ān 75:2 describes the human’s second stage as the blaming self (*nafs al-lawamma*) [“the accusing voice of man’s own conscience!”]. Dharamsi and Maynard describe the person at this point as having “uncontrolled behavior but pricked by conscience, often characterized by self-questioning ... guilt.”⁷³ Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa’i described this person as “blaming, conceit[ed], boasting, critic[al] of others, [having] hidden hypocrisy and ... lov[ing] fame and leadership.”⁷⁴ Qur’ān 91:7 describes the third stage as the inspired self (*nafs al-mulhamah*) [“Consider the human self, and how it is formed in accordance with what it is meant to be”]. Dharamsi and Maynard call

⁷⁰ Lings, 13.

⁷¹ Sabnum Dharamsi and Abdullah Maynard, “Islamic-Based Interventions,” in *Counseling Muslims: Handbook of Mental Health Issues and Interventions*, eds. Sameera Ahmed and Mona M. Amer (New York: Routledge, 2012), 152.

⁷² Shaykh Muḥammad Sa’id al-Jamal al-Rifa’i as-Shadhdhuliyah, *He Who Knows Himself Knows His Lord* (Canada: Sidi Muḥammad Press, 2007), 63.

⁷³ Dharamsi and Maynard, 152.

⁷⁴ Al-Jamal al-Rifa’i, *He Who Knows Himself Knows His Lord*, 69.

this person a “creative, artistic, liberal, loving self.”⁷⁵ Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa’i described the person’s qualities at this stage as “generosity, satisfaction, knowledge, humbleness, patience, clemency, enduring harm, pardoning people and encouraging them to become pious, accepting their excuses and seeing that Allah (*sūbhānahū wa-ta ‘ālā*) [all glory and praise to him] is holding everything by the forelock.”⁷⁶ Qur’ān 89:27 describes the fourth stage as the certain self (*naḥs al-muma’innah*) [“O though human being that hast attained to inner peace!”]. Dharamsi and Maynard state that this person is “contained and remembering God. Confident and trusting, the self has become loyal to the path of worship and self-purification.”⁷⁷ Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa’i characterized the human at this state as generous, reliant on God, forbearing, worshipful, grateful, content with destiny, and patient with afflictions and difficulty.⁷⁸ Qur’ān 89:28 describes the fifth stage as the content self (*naḥs al-radiyah*) [“enter, then, together with My [other true] servants”]. For Dharamsi and Maynard, the person at this stage is “contented with ... difficulty or ease. Seeing God in every circumstance.”⁷⁹ Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa’i describes this person as reaching the end of human qualities until she subsists in God, detached from everything other than God, sincere, full of faith, scrupulous, and having a contented acceptance of everything that occurs in the world without agitation due to the soul being drowned in witnessing absolute beauty. Qur’ān 89:28 describes the sixth stage as the self that everything is pleased with (*naḥs al-mardiyah*) [“well-pleased [and] pleasing [Him]”]. Such a person is “in harmony with their environment” per Dharamsi and Maynard.⁸⁰ For Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa’i, this person abandons everything other than God, is gentle and kind with people, encourages

⁷⁵ Dharamsi and Maynard, 152.

⁷⁶ Al-Jamal al-Rifa’i, *He Who Knows Himself Knows His Lord*, 90-91.

⁷⁷ Dharamsi and Maynard, 152.

⁷⁸ Al-Jamal al-Rifa’i, *He Who Knows Himself Knows His Lord*, 111.

⁷⁹ Dharamsi and Maynard, 152.

⁸⁰ Dharamsi and Maynard, 152.

people to righteousness, pardons others, loves others, guides them to the light of their spirits, and unites the love of God with the love of people.⁸¹ The seventh stage of the human being's spiritual journey is described in Qur'ān 4:55 where the human is referred to as a completed self (*nafs al-kamila*) ["and among them are such as [truly] believe in him"] and in 5:54 ["O you who have attained to faith! . . . [people] who strive hard in God's cause, and do not fear to be censured by anyone who might ensure them: such is God's favour"]. According to Dharamsi and Maynard, this person is "Living by Divine Love."⁸² Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa'i explains that this person is subsisting in God, living spiritually in God's unity while physically in the material world of multiplicity, and bringing the unity and multiplicity together. This person's movements are acts of goodness; she gives the gifts of the divine lights and good tidings so that spiritual seekers experience joy, happiness and attraction to God in their hearts.⁸³

Familiarity with these stages along the way allows the human to recognize her own place along the spiritual journey, including when she has progressed forward and when she has slipped backward. Further, knowledge of these stages informs the spiritual teachers who guide others along the journey; the catalyst for moving from one stage to the next is specific to the stage. In other words, recognizing the stage a person is in allows a teacher who is familiar with the stages to recommend a remedy that is specific to the person and the stage she is in.

Many other Qur'ānic verses (*ayats*) also convey the idea of traveling the path of Islam as a gradual journey in which God moves the human incrementally; this journey is often referred to as the "straight way:"

We do raise by degrees whom We will. Verily, thy Sustainer is wise, all-knowing. And We bestowed upon him Isaac and Jacob; and We guided each of them as We had guided Noah aforetime. And out of his offspring, [We bestowed prophethood upon] David, and

⁸¹ Al-Jamal al-Rifa'i, *He Who Knows Himself Knows His Lord*, 117.

⁸² Dharamsi and Maynard, 152.

⁸³ Al-Jamal al-Rifa'i, *He Who Knows Himself Knows His Lord*, 119.

Solomon, and Job, and Joseph, and Moses, and Aaron: for thus do We reward the doers of good; and [upon] Zachariah, and John, and Jesus, and Elijah: every one of them was of the righteous; and [upon] Ishmael, and Elisha, and Jonah, and Lot. And every one of them did We favour above other people; and [We exalted likewise] some of their forefathers and their offspring and their brethren: We elected them [all], and guided them onto a straight way. (Qur'ān 6:83-87)

Referring to the spiritual journey as a “straight way” is a means by which God strengthens the human’s resolve for the spiritual journey and conveys that the human can be successful in undertaking the journey. Several passages, like this one, explain what constitutes the “straight way:”

Say: "Come, let me convey unto you what God has [really] forbidden to you: "do not ascribe divinity, in any way, to aught beside Him; and [do not offend against but, rather,] do good unto your parents; and do not kill your children for fear of poverty – [for] it is We who shall provide sustenance for you as well as for them; and do not commit any shameful deeds, be they open or secret; and do not take any human being’s life – [the life] which God has declared to be sacred – otherwise than in [the pursuit of] justice: this has He enjoined upon you so that you might use your reason; and do not touch the substance of an orphan – save to improve it – before he comes of age." And [in all your dealings] give full measure and weight, with equity: [however,] We do not burden any human being with more than he is well able to bear; and when you voice an opinion, be just, even though it be [against] one near of kin. And [always] observe your bond with God: this has He enjoined upon you, so that you might keep it in mind. And [know] that this is the way leading straight unto Me: follow it, then, and follow not other ways, lest they cause you to deviate from His way. [All] this has He enjoined upon you, so that you might remain conscious of Him. (Qur'ān 6:151-153)

For Zarrūq, an earnest effort to walk the straight way, required being “concerned solely with what is obligatory and forbidden,”⁸⁴ in other words, following the Qur’ānic orders and avoiding its prohibitions. Zarrūq apparently believed that the Shadhiliyyah order of Sufism is unique its devotion to the primacy of this concern, stating that “the Shadhiliyyah is the one order founded wholly on the principle of giving up self-will before God’s commandments.”⁸⁵ Success in following God’s commandments required application of human understanding of the divine

⁸⁴ Zarrūq, 39.

⁸⁵ Zarrūq, 35.

orders and prohibitions revealed in the Qur' ān and *sunnah*: “jurisprudence is essential in Sufism because it regulates the actions of the Sufi, allowing one to reach the goal.”⁸⁶

One of the most powerful depictions of the spiritual journey occurs in the story of the miraculous night journey of the Prophet, blessings and peace be upon him. This event is referenced in Qur' ān 17:1: “Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Inviolable House of Worship [at Mecca] to the Remote House of Worship [at Jerusalem] – the environs of which We had blessed – so that We might show him some of Our symbols: for, verily, He alone is all-hearing, all-seeing.” It is also explained in much further detail in numerous *ḥadīth* reports. On this journey, God transport the Prophet, blessings and peace be upon him, from Mecca to the location of the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, where he prayed with the other prophets. Then he was taken by the angel *Jibrīl* (Gabriel), who showed him hell and heaven, and escorted him through the different heavenly realms. Then he rose to a place of proximity to God, as described in Qur' ān 53:8-10: “and then drew near, and came close, until he was but two bow-lengths away, or even nearer. And thus did [God] reveal unto His servant whatever He deemed right to reveal.” Sells describes this ascension as an “ascent through the seven heavens to the divine throne.”⁸⁷ Lings describes the Prophet's night journey in terms that universalize it and liken it to the spiritual journey of every human and the desired end of every Islamic Sufi -- “he was ‘decreated’, that is, reabsorbed, body into soul, soul into Spirit, and Spirit into the Divine Presence.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Zarrūq, 39.

⁸⁷ Sells, 47.

⁸⁸ Lings, 35.

Islamic Spiritual Theology

For a glimpse into what about God allows for connections to humans in Islamic spirituality, the spiritual seeker turns again to Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*. In Qur'ān 45:20, God informs humanity of the value of the Qur'ān in helping the human find the way along this journey: “This [revelation, then,] is a means of insight for mankind, and a guidance and grace unto people....” As we saw in Qur'ān 6:83-87 (above), God conveys that He is actively helping the human progress on the spiritual journey by raising the human “by degrees.” With its listing of Isaac, Jacob, Noah, etc., this passage also conveys that God has sent His message to many communities through many messengers across the expanse of many times. This chronicling of God having sent humanity bearers of His message across cultures and times recurs throughout the Qur'ān, such as in 4:163-165:

Behold, We have inspired thee [O Prophet] just as We inspired Noah and all the prophets after him – as We inspired Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and their descendants, including Jesus, and Job, and Jonah, and Aaron, and Solomon; and as We vouchsafed unto David a book of divine wisdom; and as [We inspired other] apostles whom We have mentioned to thee ere this, as well as apostles whom We have not mentioned to thee; and as God spoke His word unto Moses: [We sent all these] apostles as heralds of glad tidings and as warners.

We find a similar depiction of God sending insight, guidance and grace for the human journey in Qur'ān 87:6 with “We shall teach thee,” and in 87:8 with “and [thus] shall We make easy for thee the path towards [ultimate] ease.” Qur'ān 40:60 tells us that God is responsive: “But your Sustainer says: “Call unto Me, [and] I shall respond to you,” which is reiterated elsewhere, such as in Qur'ān 27:62, in which the human is reassured of God’s hearing and responding to his calls: “Does He not answer the distressed who call on Him and relieve their suffering?” Moreover, *ḥadīth* assures the human that God is more than responsive, that He responds in disproportional generosity: “Whoever approaches Me by a hand’s span, I will approach by an

arm's span.”⁸⁹ Rūmī provides a similar reassurance of God's generous response to the spiritual seeker -- “God will give you what you seek. Where your aspiration lies, that you will become.... (F 77/89).”⁹⁰

Another *ayat* that conveys God's active guidance in human lives – “But as for those who strive hard in Our cause-We shall most certainly guide them onto paths that lead unto Us” (Qur'ān 29:69) – makes the important point that the spiritual journey from a Qur'ānic, and thereby Islamic, perspective is not an exclusive one; rather it is inclusive; the paths are multiple. God's embracing attribute and acceptance of multiple ways to take the spiritual journey is repeated in Qur'ān 5:69: “For, verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Sabians, and the Christians – all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds – no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve.”

The Holy Qur'ān also offers the human God's self-description in many verses that include divine names and attributes, such as these in Qur'ān 59:23-24:

God is He save whom there is no deity: the Sovereign Supreme, the Holy, the One with whom all salvation rests, the Giver of Faith, the One who determines what is true and false, the Almighty, the One who subdues wrong and restores right, the One to whom all greatness belongs! Utterly remote is God, in His limitless glory, from anything to which men may ascribe a share in His divinity! He is God, the Creator, the Maker who shapes all forms and appearances! His [alone] are the attributes of perfection. All that is in the heavens and on earth extols His limitless glory: for He alone is almighty, truly wise!

Significantly, the Qur'ān and each of its chapters save one begin with a phrase that emphasizes the divine names for mercy and compassion – “In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate” (*Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahīm*). Some of the divine names describe God's

⁸⁹ Muslim ibn al- Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi Sharḥ an-Nawawī* (Cairo: Al-Matba'a al-Misriyya, 1924), Dhikr 2, 3, & 20-22, and Tawba 1. Quoted in Sells, 157.

⁹⁰ Chittick, 212.

attributes of majesty and severity, though the names relating to God's gentleness and beauty, God's mercy, grace, love and compassion, occur exponentially more often. In fact, the name *ar-Rahman*, conveying mercy, grace, compassion, and motherly love, is given special attention – “Say: ‘Invoke God, or invoke the Most Gracious: by whichever name you invoke Him, [He is always the One – for] His are all the attributes of perfection’” (Qur’ān 17:110). This *ayat* conveys that the name *ar-Rahman* has a level of equivalency with the name *Allah*, which is known as the name that unifies God's other names and attributes. The importance of the *basmala* (the phrase that begins the Qur’ān and all but one of its chapters – “In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate”), and the singling out of the name *ar-Rahman* cannot be overemphasized; they establish that first and foremost God is merciful and compassionate. They establish that Islam as a religion operates within a framework of God's mercy, grace, compassion, and love; that God's acts operate within this same framework of mercy, grace, compassion, and love; and that Islamic Sufism is a path of love.

A particular *ḥadīth qudsī*, a saying of the Prophet Muḥammad that conveys God's revelation, offers insight into God's intention for creation: “I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be known and so I created the world.”⁹¹ Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa’i expounds on this *ḥadīth* in a way that makes it revelatory about both God and the human, and in a way that evokes both the spiritual journey's beginning and end: “As Allah has said, ‘I was a hidden treasure that desired to be known. So I manifested all the creation to reveal the essence of the deep secret knowing of Myself. He whom I created to reveal the treasure carries within himself this treasure, but he must explode the mountain of his existence to discover the treasure which is hidden within it.’”⁹² In

⁹¹ Lings, 54.

⁹² Shaykh Muḥammad al-Jamal al-Rifa’i as-Shadhuli, *Music of the Soul* (Canada: Sidi Muḥammad Press, 2002), 172.

Chittick's translation of Rūmī he points out the paradox of the human failure to realize the treasure hidden within: "God is exceedingly near to you. Whatever thought and idea you conceive, God is next to it. For He gives existence to the thought and idea and places it before you. But He is so near that you cannot see Him. What is so strange about that? Whatever you do, your intellect is with you, initiating the action. But you cannot see the intellect. Although you see its effects, you cannot see its essence. (F 172/180)"⁹³ This failure, and the human's need to embark and persevere from stage to stage along the spiritual journey is in fact a mercy for "if his [God's] face were unveiled, the sublimities of his face would burn up everything reached by his gaze."⁹⁴

Chittick also expounds on this *ḥadīth qudsī*, and he does so in a way that ties all of creation to an outpouring of God's love:

although in His Essence God is beyond all need, yet at the level of His Attributes He said, 'I desired (or 'loved') to be known, so I created the world.' ... Hence God's Love for manifesting the Hidden Treasure through the prophets and saints was the motivating force in His creation of the universe. As a result, Love courses throughout the world's arteries. All movement and activity result from that original Love; the worlds' forms are but the reflections of its unique reality.⁹⁵

Chittick further places the idea that "the worlds' forms," i.e., all created beings, are reflections of God in the context of God's mercy:

all creation is a manifestation of God's Severe and Gentle Names, but the latter always take precedence ontologically over the former. Wherever we may see the manifestation of Wrath and Severity, e.g., in suffering and evil, we should know that God's Mercy and Gentleness will soon manifest themselves. Or rather, all suffering and evil exist only to manifest a greater joy and good. However bleak the form may be, the meaning is always Mercy, which is eternally prior to Wrath.⁹⁶

⁹³ Chittick, 45.

⁹⁴ Muslim ibn al- Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi Sharḥ an-Nawawī* (Cairo: Al-Matba'a al-Misriyya, 1924), 1:161-162. Quoted in Sells, 130.

⁹⁵ Chittick, 197.

⁹⁶ Chittick, 46.

Lings echoes this idea of the created being mirroring God's attributes in his assertion that all human relationships also mirror the revelation of God's attributes:

when it is said that God is Love, the highest meaning this can have is that the Archetypes, of all the positive relationships—conjugal, parental, filial and fraternal—are Indivisibly One in the Infinite Self-Sufficing Perfection of the Divine Essence. A less absolute meaning is that the central relationship, namely the conjugal one on which the others depend and in the background of which they are already present, has its Archetype in the polarization of the Divine Qualities into Qualities of Majesty and Qualities of Beauty.⁹⁷

Not only is God guiding the human on a path of love, embracing all of creation in mercy, and establishing all of creation as reflections of Him, God is revealing Himself in ever-present signs. Qur'ān 45:3-4 explains that God's signs are in the heavens, the earth, i.e., the natural world, human nature, and animals: "Behold, in the heavens as well as on earth there are indeed messages for all who [are willing to] believe. And in your own nature, and in [that of] all the animals which He scatters [over the earth] there are messages for people who are endowed with inner certainty." God's signs are plentiful, especially in consideration of the trillions of galaxies in the observable universe, for God tells us: "In time We shall make them fully understand Our messages [through what they perceive] in the utmost horizons [of the universe] and within themselves" (Qur'ān 41:53).

Islamic Spiritual Anthropology

For a glimpse into what about humans allows for connection to God in Islamic spirituality, the seeker turns again to Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*. As referenced above, the human's *fiṭra*, primordial nature of innate goodness, is a function of being created in the image of God, as related in a well-known *ḥadīth* that appears in both *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* and *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (the

⁹⁷ Lings, 53.

ḥadīth collection of the Persian scholar Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl ibn Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mughīrah ibn Bardizbah al-Ju‘fī al-Bukhārī): “Allah created Adam [humankind] in His own image.” To recap, the human is created in the image of God by virtue of God creating the human as a reflection of Him and as manifestation of His names and attributes. In speaking of the human’s place in the creative order, Chittick writes, “If man becomes the mirror for all things, this is because all of God’s Attributes, i.e., the archetypes of all of existence, are reflected within him. In other words, through him the Hidden Treasure becomes outwardly manifest in its totality. He is the goal of creation, for through him the Hidden Treasure becomes known. Since he is the goal, he is the “last” thing to enter into existence. All other things are preparations for his coming and means for him to attain to his spiritual perfection.”⁹⁸

This precept does not mean to claim that the human necessarily actualizes this potential. Chourief points out the sagacity of bearing in mind a realistic perception of humanity as a whole: “Narrated ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar: ‘People are similar to a heard of camels: out of a hundred, you will hardly find a single one capable of long journeys.’ (Quoted by al-Bukhārī [and Muslim]. Authenticated *ḥadīth*).”⁹⁹ Some chosen few human beings do reach their potential: “Creation fulfills its ultimate purpose through the prophets and the saints, that is, those who have actualized all the potentialities of the human state.”¹⁰⁰ According to Qur’ān 2:31, this potential is inherent as God uniquely gifted the human with knowledge – “and He imparted unto Adam the names of all things.” Moreover, Qur’ān 51:56 instructs that attainment of this knowledge is the human’s purpose -- “and [tell them that] I have not created the invisible beings and men to any end other than that they may [know and] worship Me.” Despite the human’s inestimable potential, the ego

⁹⁸ Chittick, 65.

⁹⁹ Chourief, 79.

¹⁰⁰ Chittick, 61.

prevents its realization in most of humanity; as Chittick notes, “Everything man can possibly wish to possess is contained within himself. Made in God’s image, he embraces all of His Attributes. Man’s perfected heart is God’s Throne, but his ego is the veil which prevents him from seeing his true Self.”¹⁰¹

Chittick puts the beginning and end of the spiritual journey in the context of human characteristics:

originally man’s spirit dwelt with God in a state of oneness with all other spirits and the angels. Having accepted the Trust, man’s spirit was given a body in this world. As we have already seen, in one respect the body is utterly opposed to the spirit, but in another respect it is the spirit’s reflection or shadow.... Having entered into this world, the spirit forgot its original home and its covenant with God. Man identifies himself with his ego and is unaware of the ocean of the spirit that lies just below the foam of his awareness. If man can pass beyond the veil of his own ego, his spirit can rejoin its original state of purity and unity.¹⁰²

Further, Chittick’s translation of Rūmī quoting the Prophet, blessings and peace be upon him, conveys that God created the human with an angelic nature and a clay nature, i.e., earthly nature: “God the Most High created the angels and placed within them the intellect, He created the beasts and placed within them sensuality, and He created the children of Adam and placed within them both intellect and sensuality. So he whose intellect dominates his sensuality is higher than the angels, and he whose sensuality dominates his intellect is lower than the beasts. (M IV between 1496 and 97).”¹⁰³

The presence of an angelic nature and clay nature does not mean that those humans who are characterized as “lower than beasts” fail to fulfill their creative purpose. Rather, Chittick asserts that “all opposites are correlative terms and ultimately manifest a single reality.... the prophets and Iblis [Satan] are performing a single task: making the Hidden Treasure manifest by

¹⁰¹ Chittick, 148.

¹⁰² Chittick, 69-70.

¹⁰³ Chittick, 85.

inciting people to display their inward natures. Those who follow the prophets and saints show that within them the Attribute of Gentleness predominates, while those who follow Satan reveal that they are primarily manifestations of the Attribute of Severity. But in both cases the goal and end result is the same: the manifestation of God's nonmanifest Attributes."¹⁰⁴ Yet within this singularity of purpose in manifestation of God's attributes is infinite multiplicity. As God is infinite, so also is His imagination and contingent manifestations. Accordingly, as Chittick notes, humans manifest infinite degrees of realization of their potential: "The spiritual experiences undergone by the travelers are infinitely varied and ranked in innumerable degrees."¹⁰⁵

The Qur'ān clearly depicts humankind as being divided into three groups – 1) those who most fully realize their inherent potential and are thus brought near to God, 2) those whose angelic nature predominates, by which they attain faith, good deeds, etc., and 3) those whose clay nature predominates:

[on that Day,] then, shall you be [divided into] three kinds. Thus, there shall be such as will have attained to what is right: oh, how [happy] will be they who have attained to what is right! And there shall be such as will have lost themselves in evil: oh, how [unhappy] will be they who have lost themselves in evil! But the foremost shall be [they who in life were] the foremost [in faith and good works]: they who were [always] drawn close unto God! (56:7-11)

Per Qur'ān 22:46, those humans whose clay nature predominates are blind, not of the eyes, but of the heart, i.e., their egos have veiled them from perceiving the true nature of things: "Have they, then, never journeyed about the earth, letting their hearts gain wisdom, and causing their ears to hear? Yet, verily, it is not their eyes that have become blind – but blind have become the hearts that are in their breasts!" Chittick describes the varied perception of the different groups of humans as follows: "To him whose intellect dominates his ego, the prophets and saints will

¹⁰⁴ Chittick, 99.

¹⁰⁵ Chittick, 246.

appear as celestial messengers of felicity, the embodiments of the Universal Intellect. But if a man's ego dominates his intellect, he will see the prophets and saints as messengers of suffering and ugliness, since their light will appear to him as the negation of his own ego's substance. Hence his ego will see the light of their gentleness as the fire of severity and wrath. In short, the prophets and saints appear as mirrors to those who look at them. The man of intellect sees light, the man of ego fire."¹⁰⁶

On multiple occasions, Rūmī assures us that we need not despair of our human failing, such as in “look not at your own incapacity—look at your seeking! Your seeking is God's deposit within you, for every seeker is worthy of the object of his search.... (M V 1727 29-30, 33-35)”¹⁰⁷ and “whatever makes you tremble—know that you are worth just that! That is why the lover's heart is greater than God's Throne (D 6400).”¹⁰⁸ Here Rūmī's poetry echoes the reassurance of Qur'ān 29:69: “But as for those who strive hard in Our cause – We shall most certainly guide them onto paths that lead unto Us: for, behold, God is indeed with the doers of good.” Thus, we are encouraged to embark on the path of love, to busy ourselves with striving to progress from each stage to the next, and to be patient, for even in our patience, there is a rising by degrees. Muslim jurist and theologian Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī's description of the degrees of patience evokes hope for ascending to the group of humans who are brought near: ““The first [degree of patience] consists in abandoning concupiscent desire, which is the degree of the repented servants.... The second consists in being satisfied with the Divine decree.... The third is love of all that God the Sovereign Lord does....’ (*Iḥyā'*, IV, p. 67).”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Chittick, 145.

¹⁰⁷ Chittick, 212.

¹⁰⁸ Chittick, 212.

¹⁰⁹ Chourief, 37.

The Spirituality of Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī

Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Al-Ghazālī (1058 – 1111) was a renowned Islamic theologian and jurist as well as a philosopher and mystic. He wrote prolifically and was influential in the practice of Islam, Islamic thought, and philosophy. He held an extremely prestigious position as professor at Al-Nizamiyya of Baghdad before leaving his career to pursue a somewhat ascetic lifestyle. After leaving his career, his lifestyle was ascetic in a spiritual sense in that he strove to rid himself of worldly concerns and motivations. This asceticism was not the extreme form of retiring to a cave or a mountain top; rather, it was ascetic in the sense that he spent several years in which he refrained from the sort of large-scale, public teaching that had been part of his career, and he sought solitude to devote to spiritual practice. At the same time, he also received visitors, continued teaching privately, and continued to write and publish. He wrote prolifically and is most well-known for his work *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, its rewrite *The Alchemy of Happiness*, as well as *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, *The Beginning of Guidance*, and *Jewels of the Qur'ān and its Pearls*. He wrote and taught on childhood development, philosophy, and science, as well as Islamic jurisprudence, logic, reason, and Sufism. Taqī al-Dīn Al-Subkī, an Islamic scholar and judge, said of Al-Ghazālī,

his heart was enclosed with a piety and a solitude in which his chosen companion was none other than obedience to God and a denudation [*tajrīd*] which makes him visible, for he indeed was unique in the sea of unification [*tawḥīd*: or proclamation of God's unity ...]—

He cast down the page to lighten his luggage,
And his provisions, and even his sandal he discarded.
He left the world behind him and devoted himself to God, dealing [only] with Him
privately and publicly.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ R. J. McCarthy, "Introduction," in *Deliverance from Error: Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*. trans. R. J. McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 13.

Characteristics of Al-Ghazālī's Spirituality

At the age of thirty-seven, Ghazālī left his career and prestigious position in Baghdad to pursue “the path of spiritual perfection”¹¹¹ because of a newfound self-awareness – namely, that his life had become focused on this world rather than the next, and that his intention was self-aggrandizement rather than purely for God: “I also considered my activities—the best of them being public and private instruction—and saw that in them I was applying myself to sciences unimportant and useless in this pilgrimage to the hereafter. Then I reflected on my intention in my public teaching, and I saw that it was not directed purely to God, but rather was instigated and motivated by the quest for fame and widespread prestige.”¹¹² He also experienced debilitating illness, became unable to digest food, and his physicians “lost hope of treating” him. Of this time in his life, Ghazālī writes “when I perceived my powerlessness, and when my capacity to make a choice had completely collapsed, I had recourse to God Most High as does a hard pressed man who has no way out of his difficulty. And I was answered by Him Whom ‘answers the needy man when he calls on Him’ (27.63/62), and He made it easy for my heart to turn away from fame and fortune, family, children, and associates.”¹¹³ He left Baghdad and stopped teaching for a time, pursuing a somewhat ascetic lifestyle of seclusion, although he did return to teaching at private institutions.

Scholars differ in their opinions as to whether Ghazālī considered himself to be a Sufi. We do know, however, that he spent time studying with and learning from Sufis, and he spoke very highly of them. In *Un Classico della Spiritualita Musulmana*, Father Vincenzo M. Poggi

¹¹¹ McCarthy, “Introduction,” 26.

¹¹² Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error: Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, trans. R. J. McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 79.

¹¹³ Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 80.

summed up Ghazālī's position on Sufism with this declaration – “Sufism is not to be studied, but should be lived.”¹¹⁴ Seemingly, Ghazālī felt the need to make it clear how he felt about the Sufis, as he stated explicitly, “I knew with certainty that the Sufis are those who uniquely follow the way to God Most High, their mode of life is the best of all, their way the most direct of ways, and their ethic the purest.”¹¹⁵ In *Deliverance from Error*, he describes the Sufi mode of life: “I knew that their particular Way is consummated [realized] only by knowledge and by activity [by the union of theory and practice]. The aim of their knowledge is to lop off the obstacles present in the soul and to rid oneself of its reprehensible habits and vicious qualities in order to attain thereby a heart empty of all save God and adorned with the constant remembrance of God.”¹¹⁶ In the introduction to *Jewels of the Qur'ān*, Ghazālī described this mode of life further as “the journey to God by removing destructive qualities from his animal soul by undergoing asceticism so that his animal soul becomes trained and is in a good state on the straight path.”¹¹⁷ A person who does so “no longer takes any pleasure in the destructive qualities of this world and only searches for the One. Also he is given illuminating insight, critical thinking, a sharp intellect and clear understanding.”¹¹⁸ Ghazālī's asceticism, in turning away from the things of the world and striving against the lower desires of the self, is a means of readying oneself for increasing gifts from God. This asceticism performs a shedding/clearing/cleaning/emptying function, which in turn performs a filling function. The aspirant becomes clear by emptying that which is other than God in order to be filled by that which is a gift from God; at the same time, the aspirant becomes clear by filling with remembrance of God. For Ghazālī, the first requirement of the Sufi path is

¹¹⁴ Vincenzo M. Poggi, *Un Classico della Spiritualità Musulmana* (Rome: Libreria dell' Università Gregoriana, 1967). Quoted in McCarthy, “Introduction,” 29.

¹¹⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 81.

¹¹⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 77.

¹¹⁷ Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazzālī Jewels of the Quran (Jawāhir al-Qur'ān)*, ed. Laleh Bakhtiar (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 2009), 32.

¹¹⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Jewels of the Quran*, 32.

purity – “the total purification of the heart from everything other than God Most High. Its key, which is analogous to the beginning of the Prayer, is the utter absorption of the heart in the remembrance of God. Its end is being completely lost in God.”¹¹⁹

In *The Beginning of Guidance*, Ghazālī describes the outcome of the spiritual journey as follows: “When the innermost aspect of your heart becomes infused with the consciousness of Allah, it is then that the veils between you and your Lord will be lifted; the lights of gnosis will be revealed to you; the springs of wisdom will burst forth from your heart; the secrets of the heavenly and earthly dominions will be clear to you.”¹²⁰ He repeatedly emphasizes the import of God-consciousness as the beginning of the path; Ghazālī offers: “Know that its beginning is the outward form of God-consciousness (*taqwā*) and its end is the inward reality of God-consciousness.”¹²¹ In other words, the path as described by Ghazālī requires effort and self-discipline from the human, and an outpouring of help, care, and generosity from God; its beginning is outward acts of devotion to and awe of God and its end is the realization of knowledge of God. Ghazālī describes knowledge as being of four types – knowledge of God’s essence, names or attributes, acts, and of the Hereafter. He writes:

the highest and most noble of this knowledge is knowledge of God and the Last Day for this is the knowledge of what is to come. This is followed by knowledge of the straight path and the way of journeying upon it.... the highest is the knowledge of God. This is the purpose of all the other types of knowledge. This is what is sought by the seeker. The way to progress to it is to begin with the divine acts and from them to the divine names and qualities and finally from there to the divine essence.¹²²

For Ghazālī, human happiness stems from the degree to which the human assumes the morality and meanings of God’s names and attributes. In *The Noblest of Aims in the Explanation*

¹¹⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 81.

¹²⁰ Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, trans. Mashhad Al-Allaf (London: White Thread Press, 2010), 126.

¹²¹ Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, 22.

¹²² Al-Ghazālī, *Jewels of the Quran*, 30.

of *God's Fairest Names*, he writes, "Striving to acquire what is possible of those qualities, and to be changed [molded] by them and to be adorned with their beauties. By this the servant becomes 'divine' [Lordly], i.e., close to the Lord Most High, and by this he becomes a companion [associate] of the heavenly host of the Angels, for they are on the carpet of proximity [to God]." ¹²³ This striving to assume God's names and attributes must not be colored by a desire for the things of the lower world. Rather, the seeker's motivation must be love of God, as Islamic studies scholar W. Montgomery Watt notes: "In the place of the dialectical and casuistical manner of the dogmatists and ritualists Ghazālī demands that one cultivate religion as an experience of an intimate order. It is in the elevation on oneself to the intuitive life of the soul and to the sentiment of man's dependence that he finds the center of religious life. *The love of God* must operate there as central motive." ¹²⁴

The measure of the human being then is the degree of his knowledge of God and love of God:

a thing's excellence is commensurate with its usefulness in leading to the beatitude of meeting God Most High in the Hereafter. For there is no 'real aim save beatitude, and there is no beatitude for a man save in the meeting with his Lord and nearness to him.... It is indeed evident that the attainment of the beatitude of meeting God in the Hereafter can be only by the acquisition of love of Him and intimacy with Him in this life. But love is acquired only by knowledge, and knowledge only by continual reflection [*bi dawām al-fikr*]. And persistence in remembrance and reflection is facilitated only by lopping off the love of this world from the heart, and that is not lopped off save by renouncing the pleasures and appetites of this world. But the renouncement of such desires is impossible save by bridling the passions, and by nothing is passion bridled as it is by the fire of fear. ¹²⁵

¹²³ Al-Ghazālī, *The Noblest of Aims in the Explanation of God's Fairest Names*, in *Deliverance from Error*, 291.

¹²⁴ W. Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī*, (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1953), 14-15. Quoted in McCarthy, "Introduction," 49.

¹²⁵ William McKane *Al-Ghazālī's Book of Fear and Hope* [Book XXXIII of the *Iḥyā'*]. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962). Quoted in McCarthy, "Introduction," 36.

While the acquisition of knowledge does come through the seeker's striving, devotion, and acts of worship, it comes as a gift from God, a gift that takes the form of light that God bestows upon the seeker's heart. Describing his transformation from a period of skepticism, Ghazālī reports that his "soul regained its health and equilibrium" not from reason, but from "the effect of a light which God Most High cast into my breast. And that light is the key to most knowledge."¹²⁶ In addition to love for and hope in God, the means for traversing the spiritual journey is "cultivation of greater beauty of character"¹²⁷ in significant part through fear, as Islamic scholar Reverend Richard Joseph McCarthy noted of Ghazālī: "He lays stress on the need of such a striking of terror into the minds of the people.... The horrors of hell must be kept before men; he had felt them himself. We have seen how otherworldly was his own attitude, and how the fear of the Fire had been the supreme motive in his conversion; and so he treated others."¹²⁸ While keeping "the horrors of hell" before humanity is a Qur'ānic theme, these horrors are consistently and repeated juxtaposed with the promises of the delights of Paradise, as in the following passage:

[All of you are destined to die.] Now if one happens to be of those who are drawn close unto God, happiness [awaits him in the life to come], and inner fulfilment, and a garden of bliss. And if one happens to be of those who have attained to righteousness, [he, too, will be welcomed into paradise with the words,] "Peace be unto thee [that art] of those who have attained to righteousness!" But if one happens to be of those who are wont to call the truth a lie, and [thus] go astray, a welcome of burning despair [awaits him in the life to come,] and the heat of a blazing fire! Verily, this is indeed the truth of truths! Extol, then, the limitless glory of thy Sustainer's mighty name! (Qur'ān 56:88-96)

Similarly, Qur'ān 5:19 refers to Muḥammad as "a bearer of glad tidings and a warner;" this trait of being both a warner and bearer of glad tidings is mutual amongst the prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān as we saw earlier in Qur'ān 4:165. Thus, Ghazālī's remarks about the function of fear should not be separated from his remarks about the function of love of God or the light which

¹²⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 57.

¹²⁷ McCarthy, "Introduction," 47.

¹²⁸ McCarthy, "Introduction," 46.

God cast into his heart because based on the prophetic example and the Qur’ānic message, God draws us closer to Her through the movement of warning and glad tidings, of fear and hope.

Accordingly, Ghazālī likens fear and hope to “two wings by which the elect fly to heaven and the two mounts in which they traverse the paths to the Hereafter.”¹²⁹ Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa’i describes the function of fear and hope in the spiritual journey as follows:

To have one of them without the other is a lack in him [the seeker] because fear on its own brings about desolation and loneliness and longing for the Beloved [God], and this is because of the density of the veil which separates the lover [the seeker]. Hope on its own allows the lover to fall into a state of amazement and astonishment in which he may become lacking in good manners. The seeker only walks in the perfect way when the manifestation of both of these attributes is balanced in him.¹³⁰

Much about Ghazālī’s spirituality can be gleaned from how he advised others. In his work, *The Infamies (Enormities) of the Batinites and the Virtues (Merits) of the Mustazhirites*, Ghazālī offered his perspective on the religious duties of the religious and political leader of the Muslim community. He was writing in reference to Mustazhir Billāh, who was the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad, Iraq from 478/1094 to 512/1118. Ghazālī explained the Caliph’s religious duties as follows: 1) knowing why God created man and what man’s work is in this life, 2) purifying his own heart as “the seat and source of piety,” 3) knowing that the position’s responsibility is “the betterment of men,” which can only be achieved by bettering his own heart and soul, 4) recognizing that God made man with both angelic and animal natures, and that man will be either angelic or bestial in the Hereafter in accordance with what he was in this life.¹³¹

From this advice, Ghazālī makes clear that his spirituality is based on the Qur’ān’s explanation of humanity’s purpose: “God Most High has said: ‘I have not created jinn and mankind except to

¹²⁹ McCarthy, “Introduction,” 36.

¹³⁰ Al-Jamal ar-Rifa’i, *Music of the Soul*, 423.

¹³¹ Al-Ghazālī, *The Infamies (Enormities) of the Batinites and the Virtues (Merits) of the Mustazhirites*, in *Deliverance from Error*, 239-243.

serve Me' [51.5ff]."¹³² He also is clear in his advice to the Caliph that an authentic spirituality centers around purifying the heart "of the love of the world."¹³³ To do so, he advises that "a man ought to compare the longest period of his abiding in this life, e.g., a hundred years, and the length of his abiding in the afterlife, which is endless."¹³⁴ In relation to knowledge and management of one's own soul, Ghazālī's advises adherence to these Qur'ānic exhortations:

as God Most High said: '[O David] ... follow not passion ...' [38.25/26]; and the Most High said: 'Have you seen him who has taken his caprice [passion] as his God ...' [45.22/23]; and He said: 'He inclined to the earth and followed his passion and his likeness is that of the dog' [7.175/176]; and the Most High said in praise of those who resist it [passion]: 'As for him who feared the standing of [i.e., standing before] his Lord and restrained his soul from passion...' [79.40]. In general, the servant all his life long ought to be in combat with his anger and his passion, working hard [briskly] to resist them as he does to resist his enemies.¹³⁵

Part of this combat for Ghazālī is vanquishing the temptations of the devil – "because of Muḥammad's saying: 'There is no one but that he has a devil, and God helped me against my devil until I mastered him.'"¹³⁶ Part of this combat is using the body and soul for worship, as worship is the "way to salvation," until these religious duties "are represented [take shape] in the heart and are before the eye at every moment."¹³⁷ In addition to religious duties, Ghazālī also described duties associated with other leadership actions of the Caliph, including gratefully taking other's counsel; caring for those who are in need; being kind, sincere, and sympathetic; conforming to Divine Law; following the advice of elders and the example of the rightly guided

¹³² Al-Ghazālī, *On the Elucidation of the Marvels of the Heart*, in *Deliverance from Error*, 314.

¹³³ Al-Ghazālī, *The Infamies (Enormities) of the Batinites and the Virtues (Merits) of the Mustazhirites*, in *Deliverance from Error*, 240.

¹³⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *The Infamies (Enormities) of the Batinites and the Virtues (Merits) of the Mustazhirites*, in *Deliverance from Error*, 241.

¹³⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *The Infamies (Enormities) of the Batinites and the Virtues (Merits) of the Mustazhirites*, in *Deliverance from Error*, 242.

¹³⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *The Infamies (Enormities) of the Batinites and the Virtues (Merits) of the Mustazhirites*, in *Deliverance from Error*, 243.

¹³⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *The Infamies (Enormities) of the Batinites and the Virtues (Merits) of the Mustazhirites*, in *Deliverance from Error*, 243.

Caliphs (the first four caliphs following the death of Muḥammad – Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan and Ali ibn Abi Talib); exercising restraint, good morals, etc.¹³⁸ This description of duties in *The Infamies (Enormities) of the Batinites and the Virtues (Merits) of the Mustazhirites*, and his emphasis in *Deliverance from Error* on the compassion of the Prophet for his community, which he described as “greater than a father’s compassion for his son,”¹³⁹ clearly illustrate that compassion for others, both within and without the Muslim community, is core to Ghazālī’s spirituality. Reverend McCarthy noted Ghazālī’s embracing and welcoming attitude toward those outside of the Muslim community, describing Ghazālī’s book *Fayṣal al-Tafrīqa* as “display[ing] his remarkable openmindedness regarding those of other faiths and his detestation of the lavish use of cheap accusations of ‘heresy.’”¹⁴⁰

Al-Ghazālī’s Spiritual Theology and Spiritual Anthropology

As we have already seen, Ghazālī’s spiritual theology and anthropology are grounded in the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth*. As in Islamic spirituality generally, it is a spiritual theology in which God desires to be known. In his *Jewels of the Qur’ān*, Ghazālī highlights *ayats* (verses) by which God reveals something of His essence, His signs, and His acts; he highlights specific verses that correlate with the ‘Hidden Treasure’ *ḥadīth qudsī* referenced earlier. In its introduction, Ghazālī writes that the highest form of knowledge is the most difficult to realize; he explains that “knowledge of the divine essence is the most restricted knowledge ... the most difficult to comprehend,” which is “why the Qur’ān only contains intimations of this knowledge [citing

¹³⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *The Infamies (Enormities) of the Batinites and the Virtues (Merits) of the Mustazhirites*, in *Deliverance from Error*, 244.

¹³⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 97.

¹⁴⁰ McCarthy, “Introduction,” 43.

42:11, 112:4, and 6:100-101].”¹⁴¹ Despite the difficulty, the spiritual seeker must strive to understand what God is revealing through this holy book; Ghazālī continues:

most of the signs of the Qur’ān referring to the divine names and qualities refer aspects of divine knowledge, power, life, speech, wisdom, hearing and seeing. As for divine acts ... nothing exists other than through His acts. Everything that exists are His acts, [which include] the heavens, the planets, the earth, mountains, trees, seas, plants, sending down of sweet water and all other means of sustaining plants and life ... those hidden to our senses ... the terrestrial angels entrusted with the care of the human being ... [as well as] the celestial angels.¹⁴²

Despite God’s acts taking place both in what the human can see and in what she cannot see, the fact that God is unceasingly revealing Himself to humankind is key; His signs are everywhere for the human who has the heart and mind to observe them: “He Self-discloses to some mirrors of the soul more completely, in a more direct and clearer manner, and to others more mysteriously and indirectly. This difference is because the mirror has become clear of rust, polished, perfect in shape and correct in the width of its surface.”¹⁴³

Ghazālī’s own concern for what about humans allows for connection with God focused on the human’s primordial nature. In explaining his own spiritual motivation, Ghazālī refers to another *ḥadīth*: “I also heard the tradition related from the Apostle of God—God’s blessing and peace be upon him!—in which he said: ‘Every infant is born endowed with the *fitra*: then his parents make him Jew or Christian or Magian.’ Consequently I felt an inner urge to seek the true meaning of the original *fitra*.”¹⁴⁴ Ghazālī also clearly bears in mind the potentiality of the human being as created by God, writing in *Deliverance from Error* that “there is in every age, a group of godly men of whom God Most High never leaves the world destitute. For they are the pillars of the earth, and by their blessings the divine mercy descends upon earthdwellers as is declared in

¹⁴¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Jewels of the Quran*, 14.

¹⁴² Al-Ghazālī, *Jewels of the Quran*, 14-15.

¹⁴³ Al-Ghazālī, *Jewels of the Quran*, 18.

¹⁴⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 55.

the tradition from Muḥammad—God’s blessing and peace be upon him!—in which he says: ‘Because of them you receive rain, and thanks to them you receive sustenance.’¹⁴⁵ At the same time, Ghazālī seems acutely aware of the tendency to fall short of that potentiality, viewing the human condition as that of perishing and neediness while God’s is that of mercy and compassion, for “mercy requires [calls for] an object of mercy.”¹⁴⁶ Ghazālī writes, “Al-Raḥmān is He Who is compassionate toward servants ... first by creation [of them], and secondly by guidance to the Faith and the causes of happiness, and thirdly by making [them] happy in the afterlife, and fourth by granting [them] the favor of looking at [beholding] His gracious [noble, eminent, precious] Face.”¹⁴⁷ Despite humanity’s neediness, the human, as created by God, is “predisposed [for the knowledge of God] simply by reason of his heart.”¹⁴⁸

The emphasis here is on the human heart, which Ghazālī defines as “the essence of man’s spirit which is the seat of the knowledge of God.”¹⁴⁹ In Ghazālī’s determination, “knowledge of the heart and of the true meaning of its qualities is the root of religion and the foundation of the way of those who follow the path.”¹⁵⁰ The human heart, in his estimation, is unique in being endowed by God with “a knowledge and a will not found in the other animals.”¹⁵¹ The will being referred to here is not free will or volition; rather, Ghazālī is referring to a ‘holy’ will – a will that comes into play “when a man perceives intellectually the consequences of something and the advantageous way to deal with it, [and] there springs from his essence [*dhāt*] a desire [*shawq*] for the advantageous aspect and for busying himself with its causes and willing it.”¹⁵² As for the

¹⁴⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 67.

¹⁴⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *The Noblest of Aims in the Explanation of God’s Fairest Names*, in *Deliverance from Error*, 297.

¹⁴⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *The Noblest of Aims in the Explanation of God’s Fairest Names*, in *Deliverance from Error*, 298.

¹⁴⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *On the Elucidation of the Marvels of the Heart*, in *Deliverance from Error*, 309.

¹⁴⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 87.

¹⁵⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *On the Elucidation of the Marvels of the Heart* in *Deliverance from Error*, 310.

¹⁵¹ Al-Ghazālī, *On the Elucidation of the Marvels of the Heart* in *Deliverance from Error*, 317.

¹⁵² Al-Ghazālī, *On the Elucidation of the Marvels of the Heart* in *Deliverance from Error*, 317.

knowledge of the heart, Ghazālī explains in *On the Elucidation of the Marvels of the Heart*: “The noblest kind of knowledge is the knowledge of God and His attributes and His acts. In this lies the perfection of man; and in its perfection is his happiness and his fitness for propinquity to the Presence of Glory and Perfection. The body is the soul’s mount; the soul is the place of knowledge; and knowledge is the thing purposed by man and his special quality for the sake of which he is created.”¹⁵³ Ghazālī describes the heart as “rendered happy by closeness to God ... prospers [thrives] when He chastens [praises?] it ... disappointed [frustrated] and distressed [wretched] when He disgraces [dishonors] it.”¹⁵⁴

The human heart may either be turned to the world or turned to God; that turning is what determines the human’s happiness and the outcome of the spiritual journey. Ghazālī elaborates on his conclusion regarding the human heart’s condition and potential as follows:

[the heart] may have a health and soundness—and only he will be saved ‘who comes to God with a sound heart’ (26.89), and it may have a malady which will lead to his everlasting perdition in the next life, as God Most High has said: ‘In their hearts is a malady’ (2.9/10); that ignorance of God is the heart’s deadly poison, disobedience to God its incapacitating malady, knowledge of God Most High its quickening antidote, and obedience to Him by resisting passion its healing remedy; that the only way to treat the heart by removing its malady and regaining its health lies in the use of remedies, just as that is the only way to treat the body.¹⁵⁵

The remedy then for the human heart is acts of devotion, i.e., obligatory and supererogatory acts of worship. In *The Beginning of Guidance* Ghazālī explains three levels in the seekers acts of worship:

Know that a servant is at one of three levels in terms of his religion:

- The safe one – this is one who suffices with doing the basic obligatory acts and does not commit sins.
- The one who profits – this is one who voluntarily performs good deeds and voluntary acts.

¹⁵³ Al-Ghazālī, *On the Elucidation of the Marvels of the Heart* in *Deliverance from Error*, 319.

¹⁵⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *On the Elucidation of the Marvels of the Heart* in *Deliverance from Error*, 310.

¹⁵⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 87.

- The loser – this is one who falls short in his performance of the obligatory acts.¹⁵⁶

In *Deliverance from Error*, Ghazālī speaks of what Muḥammad, God’s blessing and peace be upon him, said about the acts of worship and their purifying effect on the human heart. Ghazālī wrote, “Consider, for example, how right he was—God’s blessing and peace be upon him!—in his saying: Whoever acts according to what he knows, God will make him heir to what he does not know’; and ... ‘Whoever reaches the point where all his cares are a single care, God Most High will save him from all cares in this life and the next.’”¹⁵⁷ As we saw earlier, God assures the human being of his ability to succeed; likewise, Ghazālī reassures his students: “He who works for his Hereafter, his effort succeeds, as God Most High said: ‘He who desires the next life and strives for it, while being a believer, the striving of such will be thanked [recognized] [17.20/19].’”¹⁵⁸

Differences Between My Definition of Spirituality and Other Definitions of Islamic Spirituality

Initially, my definition of spirituality was as follows: “the process by which we travel through our hearts and souls to remind ourselves of and actualize in our lives the truth of who we are, the truth of the divine fragrance/breath within us; the journey of returning to our divine origin through learning to know and love ourselves, learning to know and love and be of service to the creation as contingent manifestations of God’s infinite outpouring of love, and learning to know, love, and worship God in every face and in every place.” In alignment with the inclusiveness of Qur’ān 5:69, this definition is inclusive of spiritual seekers who believe in God, like Christians, Jews, and Sikhs, to name a few. Yet it is a definition specific to my spirituality,

¹⁵⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, 56.

¹⁵⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 86.

¹⁵⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *The Infamies (Enormities) of the Batinites and the Virtues (Merits) of the Mustazhirites*, in *Deliverance from Error*, 240.

not a definition of spirituality in general. It is likely too theistic for some Buddhists; likewise, the use of “God” rather than “Creator” might be off-putting to some who follow the ways of the indigenous peoples of the United States. Even so, it is at least somewhat embracing of paths other than the path of Islamic Sufism, which raises the question as to whether my personal definition of spirituality is also how I define Islamic spirituality.

A beginning point for defining Islamic spirituality may be the Arabic word for Islam. The Arabic root letters for the word *islam* -- س ل م -- are the same as the root letters for the words *muslim* and the word *salaam*, meaning peace. These root letters occur 140 times in multiple forms. Some of those forms convey *muslim* (lowercase “m”) in the sense of those who submit to God, such as in Qur’ān 39:12, 41:33, and 46:15. In this form, *muslim* (lowercase “m”) means one who surrenders or those who submit to the will of God, or those who find peace through submitting to the will of God. Other forms convey *Muslim(s)* (uppercase “M”) in the sense of those who adhere to the religion of Islam, such as in Qur’ān 10:72, 27:91, and 68:35. Similarly, the word *islam* (lowercase “i”) in its literal sense conveys surrender or submission, and in a religious context conveys surrender, submission, and reconciliation to the will of God. Lowercase “i” *islam* is associated with the peace attained through submitting to the will of God and is also interpreted as peacemaking. *Islam* (uppercase “I”) conveys the one religion that Muslims believe was sent by God first to Adam, and then to subsequent prophets, for all of humanity, and was clarified through the revelation of the Qur’ān to Muḥammad as the “culminating point of all revelation.”¹⁵⁹

Based on passages like Qur’ān 21:48-92, Muslims believe that God sent the same religion/message through numerous prophets, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ismael, Isaac,

¹⁵⁹ Muḥammad Asad, trans., *The Message of the Qur’ān* (London: The Book Foundation, 2003), 178.

Jacob, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, Solomon, David, and Moses. In the Qur’ān, Allah repeatedly instructs mankind that He has sent the same religion/message to many messengers, though “the particular body of laws (*shir’ah* or *sharī’ah*) promulgated through them, and the way of life (*minhāj*) recommended by them, varied in accordance with the exigencies of the time and of each community’s cultural development.”¹⁶⁰ For example, in Qur’ān 3:84 God instructs Muḥammad as follows: “Say: ‘We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed by their Sustainer unto Moses and Jesus and all the [other] prophets: we make no distinction between any of them. And unto Him do we surrender ourselves.’” Similarly, Qur’ān 4:163-165 relates God’s revelation across time:

BEHOLD, We have inspired thee [O Prophet] just as We inspired Noah and all the prophets after him – as We inspired Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and their descendants, including Jesus, and Job, and Jonah, and Aaron, and Solomon; and as We vouchsafed unto David a book of divine wisdom; and as [We inspired other] apostles whom We have mentioned to thee ere this, as well as apostles whom We have not mentioned to thee; and as God spoke His word unto Moses: [We sent all these] apostles as heralds of glad tidings and as warners, so that men might have no excuse before God after [the coming of] these apostles: and God is indeed almighty, wise.

Not only does Allah instruct mankind that She has sent the same message in multiple revelations, God instructs mankind not to “break up” the unity of this message or to be contentious with each other:

In matters of faith, He has ordained for you that which He had enjoined upon Noah – and into which We gave thee [O Muhammad] insight through revelation – as well as that which We had enjoined upon Abraham, and Moses, and Jesus: Steadfastly uphold the [true] faith, and do not break up your unity therein. [And even though] that [unity of faith] to which thou callest them appears oppressive to those who are wont to ascribe to other beings or forces a share in His divinity, God draws unto Himself everyone who is willing, and guides unto Himself everyone who turns unto Him. And [as for the followers of earlier revelation,] they broke up their unity, out of mutual jealousy, only after they had come to know [the truth]. And had it not been for a decree that had already gone forth from thy Sustainer, [postponing all decision] until a term set [by Him], all would

¹⁶⁰ Asad, 178.

indeed have been decided between them [from the outset]. As it is, behold, they who have inherited their divine writ from those who preceded them are [now] in grave doubt, amounting to suspicion, about what it portends. Because of this, then, summon [all mankind], and pursue the right course, as thou hast been bidden [by God]; and do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: “I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high; and I am bidden to bring about equity in your mutual views. God is our Sustainer as well as your Sustainer. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no contention between us and you: God will bring us all together – for with Him is all journeys’ end.” (Qur’ān 42:13-15)

Similarly, Muḥammad instructed his followers that entrance to Paradise is tied to having faith in God and love for each other. Abu Huraira, a companion of the Prophet Muḥammad, peace and blessings be upon him, reported that the Prophet said, “You will not enter Paradise until you have faith and you will not have faith until you love each other. Shall I show you something that, if you did, you would love each other? Spread peace between yourselves.” (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 54).¹⁶¹ In this *ḥadīth*, entrance to Paradise is not tied to being a Muslim; rather, it is tied to spreading peace.

Thus, consideration of how one defines spirituality moves us further from how I initially defined it for myself to how it is defined in terms of islam and Islam. Uppercase “I” Islamic spirituality is the spirituality of Muslims in accordance with their identification as Sunni or Shia, their school of thought (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’i, Hanbali, Twelvers, Ismailis, Zaydis, etc.), and in the case of Muslim Sufis, their Sufi order, such as Naqshbandi, Chisti, Qalandari, or Mevlevi. (Some Sufi orders identify as Sunni, others as Shia, and others may consider themselves non-denominational. At the same time, many Sufi orders embrace all students, including non-Muslims.) Islamic spirituality, then, is the individual or communal Muslim experience of movement toward/relationship with/experience of Allah based on the example of the Prophet Muḥammad, blessings and peace be upon him, as well as on the example of the other prophets.

¹⁶¹ “Hadith on Love: You Will Not Enter Paradise Until You Love Each Other,” Daily Hadith Online, accessed May 17, 2020, <https://abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2012/03/16/no-paradise-until-love-one-another/>.

Islamic spirituality is characterized by *islam* (submission to God), *iman* (faith), and *ihsan* (spiritual excellence) – by belief in The Holy Qur’ān as the sacred text of Islam; adherence to the tenets of Islam, including making the testimony of faith; observing the pillars of Islam (note that while Muslims agree on many aspects of these pillars, the pillars are different in number and name for Sunni Muslims, Twelver Shia Muslims, and Ismaili Shia Muslims); belief in Allah, the angels, the holy books (the Qur’ān, the Torah as revealed to Moses, the Gospel as revealed to Jesus, and the Psalms as revealed to David), the messengers, the last day, and fate; striving to live as if you see Allah, knowing that He sees you, i.e., living with *taqwā*, God-consciousness; and belief in *tawhīd*, God’s oneness. Islamic spirituality is also characterized as a spiritual journey of annihilation of the lower self and subsistence in God through purification of the heart, and through remembering, preserving, and protecting one’s *fitra*, innate purity and reflection of God’s attributes. This journey is one in which a loving, merciful, and generous God helps and guides the human through several stages of spiritual development. The spiritual journey exists within the parameters of God’s mercy, compassion, grace and love in accordance with the *ḥadīth qudsī* relating that all of creation is an expression of God’s love and self-revelation in a desire to be known. This journey involves increasing love of God through knowledge of God, Her acts, names, qualities, and essence, which occurs through becoming busy with and absorbed in remembrance of God, turning away from the things of the world through fear and hope, and embodying God’s love by following Islamic law and *sunnah*, which require just, merciful, compassionate, kind action toward all of the creation. Thus, Islamic spirituality includes Islamic Sufism, but does not equate to it. Islamic spirituality includes the beliefs and outer forms of the strict Wahhabi Muslim’s religious practice as well as the beliefs and inner forms of a Shadhiliyya Sufi Muslim’s spiritual practice.

Lowercase “i” islamic spirituality is the spirituality of muslims, those who have surrendered to the will of God. It is both theistic and inclusive of religions other than Islam. Qur’ān 5:69 states: “for, verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Sabians, and the Christians – all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds – no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve.” Accordingly, islamic spirituality includes Muslims, Jews, Sabians, Christians, and all “who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds.” Lowercase “i” islamic spirituality is these lowercase “m” muslims’ individual or communal experience of movement toward/relationship with/experience of God.

Perrin’s and Dreitcer’s definitions of spirituality use the terms “conscious involvement” and “intentional, conscious engagement,” respectively, which raises the question as to whether intention and/or consciousness is required for spirituality. Scholars as well as laypersons have distinguished between the external forms of religion and the interior experience of spiritual transformation, which returns us to the topic of whether a spiritual nature is inherent to outer religious observances. Spirituality can be defined as beliefs, actions, thoughts, etc., that further a person’s movement toward/relationship with/experience of God when engaged with that intention. At the same time, just as a human does not create herself, a human does not create her belief in God. Rather, God creates the human and God gives the human the gift of belief in God. This perspective does not negate the human’s free will, capacity to act, or responsibility to do so. Qur’ān 87:2-3 states that God is the One, “who creates [every thing], and thereupon forms it in accordance with what it is meant to be, and who determines the nature [of all that exists], and thereupon guides it [towards its fulfilment].” This passage is followed by the following: “We shall teach thee, and thou wilt not forget [aught of what thou art taught], save what God may will

[thee to forget] – for, verily, He [alone] knows all that is open to [man’s] perception as well as all that is hidden [from it]: and [thus] shall We make easy for thee the path towards [ultimate] ease” (Qur’ān 87:6-8). Muhammad Asad describes the ease referred to in verse 87:8 as “ease of the mind and peace of the spirit.”¹⁶² This verse is also translated as “and We shall ease thy way unto ease,” which some interpret “as a reference to God’s easing the way for believers to enter Paradise.”¹⁶³ These verses set up the idea that humanity includes those who can be reminded of God and those who will hold themselves aloof from such reminders – those who will purify their hearts and souls, remember God, and pray and those who will prefer the things of this world – and that in both cases God creates and guides them toward their nature. In these verses, God moves the individual along the path that fits that individual’s disposition and the individual acts in accordance with that disposition. Accordingly, I posit that spirituality happens in both directions; it happens everywhere; it happens both with intention and without it. Spirituality includes that which the human receives as God’s gift of moving the human toward God and that which the human consciously engages in for that purpose. And, from the mystical perspective, only God is truly existent.

Spirituality in general is even more inclusive, i.e., it includes both theistic and nontheistic belief systems. Dreitcer’s and Perrin’s definitions of spirituality reference a directionality toward what a person deems the “ultimately Sacred,” “ultimate concern,” “Ultimate Mystery,” or “ultimate value.” Both definitions capture the breadth of spirituality. Regardless of whether we use these terms, or terms like deepest truth, Higher Self, Essence, or Source, spirituality in general is any way in which persons attend to the care and development of (movement

¹⁶² Asad, 1081.

¹⁶³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2015), page/location 1398, https://archive.org/details/TheStudyQuran_201709/page/n1397/mode/2up?q=87%3A8.

toward/relationship with/experience of) their energetic heart/soul/spirit in whatever way they conceive of that heart/soul/spirit. Spirituality in general includes the path of those who gravitate toward external forms of religion, as well as those who gravitate toward the transformation of their inner experience. Thus, spirituality is expressed and experienced in innumerable ways.

As with practical theologians who focus on how beliefs are embodied, I am especially interested in how spirituality is embodied. My focus is on spiritual formation practices and understanding through those practices what the practitioner experiences in their effort to ‘live out’ their spirituality, thus my attention to neuroscience, psychophysiology, emotional experience, and spiritual experience. Definitions of spirituality necessarily link beliefs with practices. For example, I *practice* spirituality in a way that is Islamic; specifically, I practice as a Muslim and a student of Shadhiliyya Sufism. I have met other Sufis who decide whether a person is Sufi based on whether s/he performs the practices that they perform in their particular Sufi order, including performing an all-night retreat once a week. In their mind, someone who fails to perform the specific practices of their order is not Sufi, just as in my mind, someone who does not observe the pillars of Islam is not practicing Islamic Sufism. Similarly, some Sufis would include taking *bayat* (a promise to follow the Sufi way as taught by the leader of that particular order) as a requirement; others would not. As I related earlier, I came to Islamic Sufism through the teachings of Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa’i. I studied his books, attended his teachings, and performed the spiritual practices he recommended for eight years before I converted to Islam. In fact, for the last four of those years, if not more, I was observing the pillars of Islam, although I did not go on pilgrimage until after taking the *shahādah*. That said, I did not always understand or embrace all of his teachings at the onset. Some of his other students took the approach that they would accept the teachings that they agreed with and ignore the

teachings they attributed to his being an older, Palestinian, Muslim man. This approach was not mine. Instead, I took the approach that in those instances when I disagreed with his teaching, it would be of better benefit to me spiritually (it would be of more help in extinguishing my ego-self) to submit to his teachings even if he was ‘wrong’ and I was ‘right.’ In taking this approach, I eventually came to a place of feeling deep resonance with the truth of every teaching I had initially disagreed with.

Not only did I consciously choose this approach of submitting to my spiritual guide, I consciously chose to cultivate a greater sense of connection to him. In his exploration of Sufism, Lings addresses the concept of a chain of transmission: “a chain (*silsilah*) ... traces a spiritual lineage back to [the Prophet]. Every Sufi order (*ṭarīqah*) is descended from the Prophet in this way, and initiation into a *ṭarīqah* means attachment to its particular chain.”¹⁶⁴ Lings also wrote of the respect due the Sufi shaykh: “as the successor to the Prophet, the shaykh is God’s messenger on earth.”¹⁶⁵ Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa’i offered his students the opportunity to take *bayāt* in an emulation of the Qur’ānic account of followers of the Prophet Muḥammad making a similar pledge – “Indeed, well-pleased was God with the believers when they pledged their allegiance unto thee [O Muḥammad] under that tree, for He knew what was in their hearts; and so He bestowed inner peace upon them from on high, and rewarded them with [the glad tiding of] a victory soon to come” (48:18). Accordingly, I ‘took hand’ with Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa’i by promising to follow the teachings of the prophets, and engaged in spiritual practices specifically with the intention to cultivate my connection to him and to receive what I could of that ‘chain of transmission.’ Teachers in our *ṭarīqah* teach that the *fana* to *baqa* process described earlier is one in which the spiritual seeker’s first annihilation is in the shaykh, the

¹⁶⁴ Lings, 38-39.

¹⁶⁵ Chittick, 340.

second is in the Prophet, blessings and peace be upon him, and the third is in God. We are taught that the shaykh who is a true Muḥammadan inheritor carries the essence of Muḥammad, and Muḥammad, in turn, carries the divine essence as God's first outward manifestation and highest revelation of God's light or spirit. Initially, when doing inner imaginal work to cultivate my connection to Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa'i, he seemed a great distance away. Over time, I came to have a sense of his spirit as within my heart and accessible at any time. While I certainly would not say that I had reached any of those annihilations, at present I do experience my sense of connection to him and intention to surrender to him (as if I am under his foot, for the purpose of purification of the dross of my clay nature and unveiling of the divine fragrance and light within my heart and soul) as if it is a doorway to Muḥammadan presence, which I also experience as another doorway in a similar fashion. Both within my *ṭarīqah* as well as in other orders, some students and practitioners of Sufism do not cultivate this sort of relationship with their shaykh. Likewise, both within my Sufi order as well as in other orders, there are varying degrees to which students and practitioners pursue and experience connection to the Prophet, blessings and peace be upon him.

As in other religions, many Muslim focus on the outer rules of Islam. I find this focus can be detrimental to my spiritual motivation. I think of the outer rules of Islam like the concrete barriers along the roadway – I have to stay in between them, they protect me and others, and I have some navigational space between them. Thus, I tend to take the approach of ignoring what seems highly 'legalistic' and what brings my heart constriction, and embracing that which brings it expansion within those limits. This approach gives me more leeway than some and less leeway than others. For example, some 'conservative' Sufis might view whirling as a spiritual practice an innovation that should be shunned because we do not have any indication that the Prophet,

blessings and peace be upon him, whirled. Others will fully embrace whirling. While I do not whirl regularly as a practice, I have tried it; I even took a couple of lessons. Likewise, I ‘sing’ as part of my practice of remembering the name of God. A conservative Sufi might prohibit singing as part of their practice of remembering the name of God, while I regularly engage in ‘singing’ with the perspective that I know what I am doing and why I am doing it; I find that the singing helps me access and ‘open’ my heart, and I know that my singing will ‘soften my heart’ as I move toward silent remembrance and drop deeper (more inward) during the practice. All of which is to say that I have a more permissive approach to following a path of attraction, i.e., implementing those practices that bring a sense of greater proximity to God.

Before turning our attention to Christian spirituality, I offer these clarifications about my spirituality to further clarify the lens through which I describe Islamic spirituality. These clarifications also serve to provide context regarding my approach to the following overview of Christian spirituality. Because I am not a practicing Christian, I cannot provide an overview of Christian spirituality as an expert. Instead, I can point toward commonalities between my experience on the path of Shadhiliyya Sufism with what I have learned about others’ experience of Christian spirituality, and I can direct us to places where something in Christian spirituality resonates with my own.

Defining Christian Spirituality

An oft-cited definition of Christian spirituality is that of theologian Sandra Schneiders: “we might define Christian spirituality as that particular actualization of the capacity for self-transcendence that is constituted by the substantial gift of the Holy Spirit establishing a life-

giving relationship with God in Christ within the believing community.”¹⁶⁶ Robin Maas and Gabriel O’Donnell define “an authentic ‘Christian’ spirituality” as “one that binds us to Christ and leads us through the power of the Holy Spirit to God the Father. It must therefore be both christological and trinitarian.”¹⁶⁷ While not explicitly doing so, religion professor Bradley P. Holt offers what strikes me as an embracing and beautiful definition of Christian spirituality. Holt contrasts the spirituality as presented in Christian spirituality books that seem to over-promise “fulfillment or self-realization” (and of which some Christians are suspicious) with “finding your true self as the result of the grace of God, discovering a path through the universe by living in relationship with a revealing God who surprises the traveler with loving gifts.”¹⁶⁸ Elsewhere in his exploration of Christian spirituality, Holt makes it clear that for him Christian spirituality is centered on Jesus Christ and the Bible, and involves “[lived] experiences, relationships [to God, creation, self and others], and practices.”¹⁶⁹ Theologian David B. Perrin mines the fields of behavioral sciences, transpersonal psychology, and psychotherapy to offer several working definitions of Christian spirituality, which he sums as follows: “Christian spirituality is the experience of transformation in the Divine-human relationship as modeled by Jesus Christ and inspired by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷⁰ Spiritual formation professor Andrew Dreitcer offers this definition: “Christian spirituality is the Christian’s (or Christian community’s) ongoing, transformative experience of intentional, conscious engagement with what she or he (or

¹⁶⁶ Sandra Marie Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?” *Horizons* 13 (Fall 1986: 253-274. Quoted in Bradley P. Holt, *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 6.

¹⁶⁷ Robin Maas and Gabriel O’Donnell, *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 17.

¹⁶⁸ Holt, 3.

¹⁶⁹ Holt, 8.

¹⁷⁰ David B. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 32.

it) construes to be the presence of God.”¹⁷¹ Dreitcer goes on to define Christian spirituality with the following characteristics:

1. “centered in/around, in relation to, Christ,”
2. “a sustained, abiding, journey, movement, growth over time – or at least an abiding over time,”
3. “transformative,”
4. experiential, i.e., “the whole of our apprehension and comprehension: the conceptual/mental/intellectual, the affective, the kinesthetic/physical. So, inner movements (of the soul, spirit, stomach), feelings, emotions, mental processes, thoughts, imaginings, fantasies, physical sensations, etc.,”
5. “consciously attending to God’s presence and activity as that plays out in all of life.... a certain experience of consciousness about and intentionality around living out the spiritual dimension of life,”
6. engagement through the spiritual movements/interactions within the person or community, the means of expressing that intrapersonal experience, and the practices that nurture those intrapersonal/intracommunal experience and expressions,
7. “comprehension, understanding, apprehension is under the control of the individual (even if the individual is ‘following’ someone or something dictated to them),” and
8. “that there is some (or a lot of) mystery about ... just how [God is with humans whether we recognize it or not] and who and what that God is.”¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Dreitcer, “Notes on ‘Spirituality and Spirituality Studies,’” 1.

¹⁷² Dreitcer, “Notes on ‘Spirituality and Spirituality Studies,’” 1-2.

Points of Convergence between Christian Spiritual Theology and Islamic Spiritual Theology

While the above definitions include recurrent themes, like the importance of experience, they range in their scope. Some specifically mention the trinity while others reference being Christ-centered or being modeled after Jesus's life. These differences are important for Christians as well as for non-Christians seeking to deepen their understanding of Christian spirituality. For example, Perrin's approach to studying Christian spirituality could be called 'inclusive scholarship.' Perrin writes that "if historians cling to a narrow theological understanding of holiness as they delve into the lives of men and women from the past and present they may miss out on innovative expressions of the way the Gospel has been incarnated in a range of time and places."¹⁷³ He also expresses this idea of 'inclusive scholarship' with this affirmation: "for there is no one way to live out the richness of God alive in the world."¹⁷⁴ For me, this perspective means that when we read about the religious/spiritual experience of someone of a different faith, especially their inner experience, we approach these readings with the sort of 'inclusive' inquiry that asks – what does this letter, poem, description, etc., tell me about this person's experience of God, about this person's desire for her own relationship with God, about her intention for her readers/students and their relationship with God. For me, Perrin's perspective means that we approach our inquiry into the experience of others whose faith differs from our own with the sort of 'inclusive' inquiry that asks, 'what does this person's lived experience of faith tell me about the possibilities for my own lived experience of faith, and what does it tell me about the possibilities for others.'

In "An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality," theologian Oliver Davies differentiates between a historical archaeology of the church versus an existential archaeology of the church.

¹⁷³ Perrin, 169.

¹⁷⁴ Perrin, 179.

Of the latter Davies writes, “They will engage with different materials, specifically with those that in some way reflect the inner life, including poetry, letters, sermons, devotional texts, the Lives of saints.”¹⁷⁵ I feel a kinship with these latter folks, the existential archaeologists, because I too am more interested in the inner reality of our fellow spiritual seekers than either the history of the church or Islamic history. In fact, I find studying Islamic and Christian history a heart-constricting experience, whereas I find studying the spiritual life of our predecessors a heart-expanding experience. An example of the sort of archaeological material Davies is talking about, i.e., illuminating and heart-expanding material that provides a glimpse into the inner life of its author, appears in the last stanza of a Welsh poem, “Maytime is the Fairest Season.” Here the author expresses a longing for proximity to God, for peace in relation to God, for a return to God, and for joy in that return:

The gift I ask, may it not be denied me,
Is peace between myself and God.
May I find the way to the gate of glory,
May I not be sad ... in your court.¹⁷⁶

In *Studying Christian Spirituality*, Perrin writes that “if historians cling to a narrow theological understanding of holiness as they delve into the lives of men and women from the past and present they may miss out on innovative expressions of the way the Gospel has been incarnated in a range of times and places. Christian holiness is ... an expression of the many imaginative and creative ways God’s Spirit has enlivened men and women to respond to the need of the times.”¹⁷⁷ From my perspective, Perrin and Davies are saying something very similar – they are both asserting that religious historians need to attend to the inner dimension of the men and women they study. Perrin states that the historian “needs to be open to moving beyond the

¹⁷⁵ Oliver Davies, trans., *Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 9.

¹⁷⁶ Davies, 276.

¹⁷⁷ Perrin, 170.

boundaries set by either [her or his] theology or [her or his] self-understanding as a faith community,”¹⁷⁸ for doing so opens the doors for transcending our limited experience; it opens the doors to making connections with inner worlds, spiritual realities, experiences, and traditions beyond our own.

In discussing the applicability of Ghazālī’s teachings for modern-day spiritual seekers, McCarthy signals his agreement with the Catholic theologians who describe “the mystical life” as “the ‘natural,’ or ordinary, fulfillment and flowing of the graces offered by God to all men of good will.” In defense of this agreement, McCarthy offers a definition of mystical theology that is inclusive of both Islam and Christianity:

for as [theologian Jean] Gerson said, ‘Theologia mystica est experimentalis cognition habita de Deo per amoris unitive complexum’ [Mystical theology is knowledge of God by experience, arrived at through the embrace of unifying love]. This is something possible for all in varying degrees, but the ‘unitive way’ must normally be preceded by the arduous ‘purgative way’ and the difficult and often lengthy ‘illuminative way.’ And at the heart of the matter it is God and God’s free gift of supernatural grace which are prevenient, accompanying and fulfilling. Yet ‘facienti quod est in se Deus non denegat gratiam’ [God does not deny grace to one who does all that lies in his power].¹⁷⁹

McCarthy seems to be using the terms “mystical life” and “mystical theology” in relation to the spiritual way of life pursued by a segment of Catholics in much the same way as the term Sufism is used to refer to the spiritual way of life pursued by a segment of Muslims. Both Christian mysticism and Islamic Sufism connote a way of life – a spiritual journey – that involves both the esoteric and the exoteric aspects of religion, and a unitive experience of God’s grace and love. McCarthy then reveals that his study of Ghazālī made him “a better practicing Catholic.” Thus, the approach of reverence, of openminded inquiry, of sincere interest in the lived inner experience modeled by Perrin, Davies, and McCarthy, is the sort that I wish to pursue here – one

¹⁷⁸ Perrin, 170.

¹⁷⁹ McCarthy, “Introduction,” 50-51.

in which the spiritual seeker realizes the value of another's spiritual experience and is led by it to a greater appreciation of "the spiritual riches at hand in [their] own ... tradition."¹⁸⁰

As a Muslim exploring convergence between Islamic and Christian spiritual theology, I look to the lived experience of faith of those with authority, those practitioners of Christian spirituality who have left us glimpses into their inner life, well-known Christian mystics, such as Julian of Norwich, English anchorite and author of *Revelations of Divine Love*. Julian's theology of divine love, and her understanding of God as loving, evokes the image of God presented in the *basmala* – "for Julian, all the divine attributes, all that is revealed of God, are aspects of his love."¹⁸¹ The idea that God has given us names by which He describes Himself, such as sovereign, just, the giver of life, etc., is not a purely Islamic one; early sixth century Christian mystic Pseudo-Dionysius wrote *The Divine Names*, in which he shows "the sense in which God is described as good, existent, life, wisdom, power."¹⁸² As we saw in Islamic spiritual theology, a way to think of God's relationship to His creation is to think of all of the divine qualities pouring out of God through the door of the mercy and love bringing manifestation into the earth; Meister Eckhart paints a similar picture in his *Commentary on the Book of Wisdom*: "'from him, through him and in him are all things (Rom[ans] 11:36).'"¹⁸³ A metaphor for this image that Sufi teacher Dr. Rosina Fawzia al-Rawi uses is the sun as absolute passionate love that radiates the divine names – the most merciful of the merciful, the bestower of mercy, the sovereign, the holy, the peace, the security, the protector, the invincible, the omnipotent, etc. Christian mystic Bonaventure's writing also echoes this image: "just as being itself is the root principle of

¹⁸⁰ McCarthy, "Introduction," 51.

¹⁸¹ Robert Mitchell, "The Spirituality of Julian of Norwich" (Background notes received in Christian Spiritualities Across the Ages with Professor Andrew Dreitcer, Claremont, California, March 10, 2017), 3.

¹⁸² Louis Dupré and James A. Wiseman, O.S.B. eds., *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 89.

¹⁸³ Dupré and Wiseman, 177.

viewing the essential attributes, and the name through which the others become known, so the good itself is the principal foundation for contemplating the emanations,”¹⁸⁴ which in turn accords beautifully with Julian’s description of spiritual growth: “In this process of growth in love, through love to Love, the human being becomes what it is meant to be,”¹⁸⁵ and with her description of existence: “It is all one love.”¹⁸⁶

Part of Julian’s conception of God’s love is that “there is no creature made that can know how much and how sweetly and how tenderly our Maker loveth us.”¹⁸⁷ This aspect of God’s love carries a connotation of the divine feminine, which accords with Julian’s statement that “as truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother,”¹⁸⁸ and which accords with the *basmala*. In Arabic, the word for mercy and the word for Lord has the same root as the word for womb, so God’s description of Himself as being universally merciful and singularly compassionate in the *basmala* connotes the concept of love that is like a mother’s womb and of love that transcends all perceived boundaries and reaches all of creation. Thus, Julian’s Christian theology accords with Islamic theology in that the more one begins to know God, to the extent that a finite created being can know the infinite God, one learns that God is absolute passionate love, and that the unceasing act of creating is an unceasing outpouring of love from God through creation to Him.

Meister Eckhart’s exposition of “God is one” from Deuteronomy 6 and Galatians 3 is astoundingly similar to the Islamic concept of *tawhīd*. For example, Eckhart writes, “The term ‘one’ signifies Existence Itself in itself along with the negation and exclusion of all nonbeing, which [nonbeing], I say, every negation entails,” and “the One and the Many are opposed. But in

¹⁸⁴ Dupré and Wiseman, 136.

¹⁸⁵ Mitchell, “The Spirituality of Julian of Norwich,” 10.

¹⁸⁶ Dupré and Wiseman, 238.

¹⁸⁷ Mitchell, “The Spirituality of Julian of Norwich,” 3.

¹⁸⁸ Dupré and Wiseman, 237.

God there is no number (as was said and proved above), because there is no falling away in him and because he is the First and is existence. Therefore, God is One.”¹⁸⁹ Further, how Eckhart speaks of John 1:1 evokes progressive Christian theologian Marcus J. Borg’s comments in *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* on the importance of how the word “son” has been translated. Meister Eckhart seems to have what Borg called a pre-Easter perspective of Jesus, i.e., as a ‘son’ as we are all sons and daughters of God, rather than a post-Easter perspective, i.e., Jesus as the only son of God, God incarnate. In *Sermon Six* Eckhart said, “The Father gives birth to his Son without ceasing: and I say more: He gives me birth, me, his Son and the same Son. I say more: He gives birth not only to me, his Son, but he gives birth to me as himself and himself as me and to me as his being and nature. In the innermost source, there I spring out in the Holy Spirit, where there is one life and one being and one work. Everything God performs is one; therefore he gives me, his Son birth, without any distinction.”¹⁹⁰ While Eckhart certainly spoke of the trinity in a way that a Muslim would not, his conception of Jesus seemingly aligns with Borg’s pre-Easter perspective of Jesus, i.e., as Jesus spoke of himself rather than as his followers related their experience of him after his death. Thus his conception of Jesus may align more closely with the Islamic conception of Jesus (as the word of God, the servant of God upon whom God bestowed the miracles of life and healing, the messenger of God, and the Messiah of Islamic eschatology) than with the post-Easter perspective of Jesus that so many have used to create intra-faith and inter-faith tension.

In *Scivias: Second Vision of Book II*, German Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen wrote this of the trinity: “So these Three Persons are one God in the majesty of one single and

¹⁸⁹ Dupré and Wiseman, 174-176.

¹⁹⁰ Dupré and Wiseman, 160.

same divinity and the unity of this divinity persists inseparably.”¹⁹¹ In the same work she wrote, “Just as three elements are to be found in human speech [sound, expressive force, breath], so the Trinity must be considered in the unity of the Divinity.”¹⁹² Hildegard also repeats the phrase “the unity of the Divinity” in the section titled “The Unity of Essence.”¹⁹³ In the same vein, Brunn and Epiney-Burgard use the phrase “the unity of Being” to describe Hildegard’s idea of who God is: “‘One in His uniqueness, to Whom nothing can be added.’ The unity of Being is manifested in triple energy: Father, Word, and Spirit.”¹⁹⁴ Despite the difference between the Christian and Islamic perspectives on the Trinity, I am struck by the similarity between Hildegard’s multiple references to God’s unity, the phrase “One in His uniqueness, to Whom nothing can be added,” the Islamic concept of *tawḥīd*, and the multiple references to God’s unity in the Qur’ān, such as in Qur’ān 112:1-4: “Say: ‘He is the One God: God the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of All That Exists. He begets not, and neither is He begotten; and there is nothing that could be compared with Him.’” I would be remiss not to mention the kinship between the Islamic vision of the spiritual journey as a path of love, the Islamic concept of God as loving, and Hildegard’s experience of God as loving, which she makes explicit in her *Book of Divine Works* (or *On the Activity of God*); she attributes her inspiration to “an overpowering vision of Divine Love.”¹⁹⁵

We see a similar kinship in the experience of Therese of Lisieux. Religious philosopher Louis Dupré and theologian James Wiseman take the stance that Therese of Lisieux is a Christian mystic because of her firm belief in Christ, her “mysticism of love,” and her seeking to

¹⁹¹ Emilie Zum Brunn and Georgette Epiney-Burgard, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1989), 28.

¹⁹² Brunn and Epiney-Burgard, 31.

¹⁹³ Brunn and Epiney-Burgard, 32.

¹⁹⁴ Brunn and Epiney-Burgard, 11, citing Hildegard’s *Liber divinorum operum* or *The Book of Divine Works*, Vis. 10, 2, 998C.

¹⁹⁵ Bob Mitchell, “Spirituality of Hildegard of Bingen: Background Notes (Handout received in Christian Spiritualities Across the Ages with Professor Andrew Dreitcer, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California, February 17, 2017), 4.

embody that love in her actions. Therese wrote that she “begged God ... to consume [her] rapidly in Love,”¹⁹⁶ which echoes the words of the famous Sufi teacher and poet Shams-ud-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāfeẓ (or Hafiz), who wrote:

Beloved,
I am waiting for You to free me
Into Your Mind
And Infinite Being.
I am pleading in absolute helplessness
To hear, finally, your Words of Grace:
*Fly! Fly into Me!*¹⁹⁷

The picture that Therese of Lisieux paints of her falling asleep during prayer time – like a small bird that is protected while it sleeps and awakes at peace ready to begin “once again its work of love”¹⁹⁸ – evokes the *basmala* for its absolute certainty that God is merciful and loving. Rather than becoming discouraged about her not being like a saint, Therese “said to [her]self: God cannot inspire unrealizable desires;”¹⁹⁹ her confidence in God’s response is evocative of the *ḥadīth* about God’s responding to the human’s efforts to approach Him with an exponentially greater response. Therese’s writing conveys her genuine sincerity, the centrality of love to her religiosity and the centrality of her striving to live her faith by emulating the love of Jesus, which evoke the idea of Sufism as a “path of love” and the effort in Islamic spirituality to live one’s faith by emulating the love and compassion of Muḥammad. Dupré and Wiseman note Therese’s “constant attempts to show her love for all, especially for the most contrary and neglected of the nuns with whom she lived.”²⁰⁰ In relation to her striving to implement Matthew 5:43-44 by loving those who do not love her in return and those who take without giving in return, Therese

¹⁹⁶ Dupré and Wiseman, 415.

¹⁹⁷ Daniel Ladinsky, trans., *I Heard God Laughing: Poems of Hope and Joy* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 50.

¹⁹⁸ Sandra Roberts, “Notes on The Spirituality of Therese of Lisieux” (Handout received in Christian Spiritualities Across the Ages with Professor Andrew Dreitcer, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California, April 14, 2017), 7.

¹⁹⁹ Dupré and Wiseman, 418.

²⁰⁰ Dupré and Wiseman, 416.

notes that while such a love seems difficult, it is actually “sweet and light (Mt 11:30)” and that it is the only sort of charity “which can expand [her] heart,”²⁰¹ all of which corresponds to the Islamic precept that Muḥammad was sent by God as a mercy for all the worlds; his compassion for his community, especially widows, orphans, those in need, as well as animals; and the Islamic pillar of *zakat*, the mandate to give charity.

Further kinship between Islamic and Christian visions of the spiritual journey can be found in asceticism – a topic underscored in both Islamic Sufism and Christian mysticism. Perrin asserts that part of Christianity is its communal nature or “social character,”²⁰² which accords with how Sufi asceticism typically occurs in a communal context. Sufi centers are most often placed in city centers based on the idea that one is to be a part of and in service to the community rather than alone in a cave or on a mountaintop (as seen in Ghazālī’s continued service while in solitude). Perrin defines asceticism in a positive light, in terms of balance and integration and achieving our “ultimate goals.”²⁰³ Perrin’s perspective that “a program of asceticism is needed to assist people in the ongoing task of becoming more of who they want to be, rather than getting stuck along the way”²⁰⁴ echoes Ghazālī’s comments on asceticism. Catholic priest Boniface Ramsey’s description of Saint Augustine of Hippo also echoes Ghazālī’s asceticism and renunciation of worldly things. Moreover, Saint Augustine’s perspective that places every human experience, choice, and exercise of free will in the context of either bringing us closer to the Divine or further from the Divine accords with Ghazālī’s singular reorientation to an intention that is purely for God – “only what is directed explicitly toward the Divine is good and worthy of human interest. Thus art, science, and natural beauty must not be viewed as possessing any

²⁰¹ Dupré and Wiseman, 426.

²⁰² Perrin, 242.

²⁰³ Perrin, 246.

²⁰⁴ Perrin, 246.

autonomy whatsoever; rather, they are all to be pressed in the service of the Divine-human relationship or else lose their *raison d'être*.”²⁰⁵ In speaking of asceticism, Perrin emphasizes that mystical experiences are not just extraordinary ones and that they are present in the “problems and difficulties, joys and blessings, encountered in day-to-day living.”²⁰⁶ As not every spiritual seeker has “special revelations or visions, or the involvement in other-worldliness,”²⁰⁷ just as not every mystic would self-describe herself as such, Perrin’s point is noteworthy. Much of our spiritual experience, whether mystics or not, is felt as mundane rather than as extraordinary. Despite the variety of ordinary and extraordinary lived experience of faith within and between religions, we have in common the challenges of integrating our experience of worldly duality together with God’s unity, however we define it.

Points of Convergence Between Islamic Spiritual Anthropology and Christian Spiritual Anthropology

On the topic of what about the human allows for connection with God, I again turn to Perrin and to the lived experience of faith of those with authority (in this case, to both well-known Christian mystics of the past and more recent men and women of faith). In his discussion of models of human development Perrin notes that “one way of outlining human development cannot be assumed to be valid for all.”²⁰⁸ Likewise, what we learn from one mystic’s spiritual anthropology does not apply to everyone. Consider Eckhart’s apophatic approach, i.e., that it is through the human’s nothingness that God fills the void with Himself – while Eckhart achieved a high spiritual station through this approach, others may be better suited to the kataphatic approach. In the “Introduction to the Commentary on the Song of Songs,” Dupré and Wiseman

²⁰⁵ Maas and O’Donnell, 41.

²⁰⁶ Perrin, 243.

²⁰⁷ Perrin, 242.

²⁰⁸ Perrin, 223.

write that Origen's contemplative/allegorical/spiritual reading of the Song of Songs teaches "that we must attain fellowship with God by the paths of loving affection and of love."²⁰⁹ While Boniface Ramsey, a Catholic priest, emphasizes the passion of Origen's mystical experiences – "experiences that undoubtedly made it possible for him to express (for the first time in Christian literature in any extended fashion) the love of God in an erotic way"²¹⁰ – Origen's spirituality seems to have included an element of eroticism and a focus on the transformative power of love of God. In other words, just as Islamic spiritual anthropology presents humanity as comprised of different groups of spiritual realization with multiple spiritual paths, so does Christian spiritual anthropology.

As in Islamic spiritual anthropology, Christian spiritual anthropology acknowledges the destructive forces of the ego-self. Perrin asserts that an authentic Christian spirituality is one that "work[s] against destructive elements"²¹¹ both in the self and in the world. Thus, both Islamic and Christian anthropology allow for the human's clay nature, i.e., earthly nature, and angelic nature, as well as point to the liberating function of an authentic spirituality; in both, to travel the path of love for God is to liberate the soul from the pull of the material and physical by following the natural attraction toward God until our ultimate reunification with Him.

Hildegard of Bingen's belief that "humans are the 'shadows of God,' reflections owing their existence to the Object reflected, while at the same time revealing its splendor (Brunn, 12)"²¹² echoes the Islamic idea that the human being reflects God's attributes and is the means by which He reveals Himself. Hildegard's conception of God's love as feminine ("love of God is

²⁰⁹ Dupré and Wiseman, 25.

²¹⁰ Maas and O'Donnell, 40.

²¹¹ Perrin, 23.

²¹² Mitchell, "Spirituality of Hildegard," 7.

maternal”²¹³) echoes the association with the womb of the divine name *Rahmān* as discussed in relation to the *basmala*. Her definition of loving God as reverence for and obedience to God, as depicted in “‘the love of God’ meant reverence, loyalty and obedience to His commands,”²¹⁴ echoes the concept of *taqwā* (God-consciousness) and Ghazālī’s speaking of the obligatory and supererogatory acts of worship as the remedy for the human heart. Hildegard’s statement in her letter to Bernard of Clairvaux, “within my soul I have knowledge,”²¹⁵ her statement in *Scivias*, “infused knowledge of all the books of Scripture,”²¹⁶ and her self-description (in the same text), “and I see, hear, and know all at once, and as if in an instant I learn what I know”²¹⁷ sound very much like Ghazālī on the type of knowledge that comes from a light that God casts into the heart (as opposed to scholastic knowledge) – “the effect of a light which God Most High cast into my breast. And that light is the key to most knowledge.”²¹⁸ Just as in Bernard’s language responding to Hildegard, this sort of knowledge, like her vision and her knowledge, is referred to as a “grace” and a “gift.”²¹⁹ Other examples of alignment between Hildegard’s perspective and the Sufi perspective include the following: her perception that “‘knowledge of good and evil’ is God’s gift to humanity ... (Hildegard, 30);”²²⁰ her belief that the gift of discernment is a source of joy while sin is a source of sadness; her idea that each choice is one that brings us either “closer to or farther from the divine design;”²²¹ and her advocating a “middle way between laxity

²¹³ Mitchell, “Spirituality of Hildegard,” 8.

²¹⁴ Mitchell, “Spirituality of Hildegard,” 8.

²¹⁵ Brunn and Epiney-Burgard, 20.

²¹⁶ Barbara J. Newman, “Introduction,” in Hildegard of Bingen, *Hildegard of Bingen: Scivias (The Classics of Western Spirituality)*, trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), 11-12. Quoted in Mitchell, “Spirituality of Hildegard of Bingen,” 2.

²¹⁷ Mitchell, “Spirituality of Hildegard,” 9.

²¹⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error*, 57.

²¹⁹ Brunn and Epiney-Burgard, 21.

²²⁰ Mitchell, “Spirituality of Hildegard,” 5.

²²¹ Mitchell, “Spirituality of Hildegard,” 8.

and self-indulgence on the one hand and excessive abstinence on the other.”²²² Similarly, Julian of Norwich’s perspective that sin is necessary but that all will be well,²²³ that sin does not break the relationship between God and man,²²⁴ that God “protects us so tenderly whilst we are in our sins”²²⁵ evokes the divine names of *Al-Ghafūr* (The All-Forgiving), which appears in the Qur’ān more than 70 times, as well as *Al-Ghaḥḥār* (The Great Forgiver), *At-Tawwāb* (The Acceptor of Repentance), and *Al-‘Afūw* (The Pardoner).

Meister Eckhart echoes the Sufi concept of *fana* in his writing about the theme of annihilating the ego-self. In *Sermon Six*, Meister Eckhart said that those who honor God are:

those who have wholly gone out of themselves, and who do not seek for what is theirs in anything, whatever it may be, great or little, who are not looking beneath themselves or above themselves or beside themselves or at themselves, who are not desiring possessions or honors or ease or pleasure or profit or inwardness or holiness or reward or the kingdom of heaven, and who have gone out from all this, from everything that is theirs, these people pay honor to God, and they honor God properly, and they give him what is his.²²⁶

In the same vein, Eckhart’s description of how God is received into the human soul in *Sermon Forty-Eight* sounds much like the Sufi *fana* and *baqa* process: “the man who has annihilated himself in himself and in God and in all created things; this man has taken possession of the lowest place, and God must pour the whole of himself in to this man, or else he is not God,” and “if a man will turn away from himself and from all created things, by so much will you be made one and blessed in the spark in the soul, which has never touched either time or place.”²²⁷ Sufi

²²² Mitchell, “Spirituality of Hildegard,” 9.

²²³ Maas and O’Donnell, 414.

²²⁴ Mitchell, “The Spirituality of Julian of Norwich,” 7.

²²⁵ Julian of Norwich, *Julian of Norwich Showings (The Classics of Western Spirituality)*, trans. Edmund College and James Walsh, pref. Jean Leclercq (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 246. Quoted in Mitchell, “The Spirituality of Julian of Norwich,” 6.

²²⁶ Dupré and Wiseman, 157.

²²⁷ Dupré and Wiseman, 163-165.

saint Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya, one of the most famous and influential Sufi women, said a prayer that sounds remarkably similar to Meister Eckhart’s sermons:

O God! If I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell
and if I worship You in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise.
But if I worship You for Your Own sake,
grudge me not Your everlasting Beauty.²²⁸

In addition, Meister Eckhart’s repetition of the phrase “we shall not be so in life everlasting”²²⁹ (or some related form of this phrase) indicates that Meister Eckhart frequently contemplated our heavenly/post-death/everlasting state, much as Ghazālī advised fear and consideration of our state when standing before our Lord on the Day of Judgment as well as consideration of the brevity of this lifetime in relation to eternity.

The depth of sincerity and conviction in the writing of John of the Cross; his willingness to leave everything that might be a distraction from God, i.e., his determination to emulate David by seeking satisfaction in God alone; the ardency of his love for God; his focus on the experience of the spiritual journey, on the experience of receiving the gift of knowledge of God by the grace of God – these all parallel the spirituality of Ghazālī. Much like one might interpret John of the Cross’s depiction of the purgative way, the illuminative way, and the unitive way in a linear manner, one might mistakenly interpret the Qur’ānic presentation of the different stages of human spiritual development, as well many Sufi masters’ depictions of the “stations of the way,” in a linear manner. However, when one asks a Sufi master about this distinction, the master will likely explain that the journey is cyclical. I suspect that this perspective holds true for John of the Cross as well. Like the Sufis, and perhaps like John of the Cross, Perrin points out the cyclical

²²⁸ Sells, 169.

²²⁹ Dupré and Wiseman, 161.

nature of the spiritual journey, and acknowledges that the possibility of falling back – of “falling into sin” – exists at any point along the way.

Despite similarities amongst the Christian mystics (such as John of the Cross and Therese of Lisieux sharing a depth of sincerity and conviction, a seemingly complete willingness to follow the examples of Jesus and David in seeking satisfaction in God alone, and an ardency of love for God and desire for union with God), differences remain (such as John of the Cross seemingly having been more concerned with the experience of the spiritual journey and receiving knowledge of God than with love/union). Some of these differences may stem from the multiplicity of denominations in Christianity. As in Islamic spirituality, there are many types of spirituality in Christianity, such as Ignatian, Mendicant, Anglican, Wesleyan, Marian, etc. Not only are there many types of Christian spirituality historically, ‘new’ types of Christian spirituality have been emerging, such as Black spirituality, Feminist spirituality, and Latin American liberation spirituality. Here too, we find similarities and inspiration. We can take the solidity of faith of Jarena Lee, the first woman preacher of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, as evidenced by statements like “I have not yet doubted the power and goodness of God,”²³⁰ as inspiration for our own faith in God’s grace, mercy and compassion toward the human, as well as affirmation of the concept of God’s in-blowing of His spirit, fragrance, breath, and light. We can take the Wesleyan perspective of faith, i.e., that faith is “not an end in itself— [it] is the means to holiness, the precondition for union with a God who is nothing but Love,”²³¹

²³⁰ Jarena Lee, “The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee,” in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 38.

²³¹ Maas and O’Donnell, 311.

as a guiding principle in the desire for sanctification and “total harmony with the will of God”²³² that we have seen in both Islamic and Christian mystics across the ages.

In commenting on what he calls “spiritualities of the margins,” Dreitcer notes that “in both [Christian Feminism and Latin American Liberation theologies/spiritualities] there is a certain emphasis on humans as being co-operators with God: co-creating, co-shaping, co-liberating, co-stewardship.”²³³ This idea of humans as co-operators with God is yet another point of convergence between Christian spiritual anthropology and Islamic spiritual anthropology; Qur’ān 13:11 presents God and humanity as co-shaping: “Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.” This idea echoes the *hadīth* reporting that Allah created Adam [humankind] in His own image, which corresponds to Genesis 1:27: “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”²³⁴ All of which echo the precept in Latin American Liberation theology that the human is a temple of God and a receptacle for God’s indwelling: “God will be present in the very heart of every human being,”²³⁵ and “not only is the Christian a temple of God; every human being is.”²³⁶ These verses and *hadīth* can be read as a divine invitation to participate in changing, in co-creating; they can be read as God inviting humankind to exercise free will to choose and actively cultivate the angelic, the light, the truth, and the purity of the human as created in God’s image so that we “participate in the struggle for the liberation of those

²³² William L. Andrews, “Introduction,” in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women’s Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 15.

²³³ Andrew Dreitcer, “Spiritualities of the Margins Background Notes” (Handout received in Christian Spiritualities Across the Ages with Professor Andrew Dreitcer, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California, April 21, 2017), 5.

²³⁴ This Bible reference is to the New International Version.

²³⁵ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 108.

²³⁶ Gutierrez, 109.

oppressed.”²³⁷ Thus, Christian black spirituality, Christian feminist spirituality, Christian Latin American liberation spirituality, Christian Wesleyan spirituality, Christian Celtic spirituality, etc., like the Islamic spiritualities, direct us to pray that God unveils the image of holiness in each of us, so that we too, like the Samaritan woman, may see within ourselves “a spring of living water.”²³⁸ Together, this leads us to the idea that our first act of liberation is to free ourselves from beliefs that we are not holy/sacred, and then to free our neighbors from any such beliefs about themselves or others. This idea of our common sacredness, of the divinity within each of us, seems the basis of our spiritualities, whether those spiritualities are Christian or Islamic, whether they are of the margin or not. In this manner, all of our spiritualities call for us to liberate ourselves and each other.

Points of Convergence Between Christian Spirituality and Islamic Spirituality in the Spirituality of Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton (1915 – 1968) was an American Catholic, Trappist monk. He wrote and taught on Christian spirituality and inter-religious dialogue, especially in relation to Zen Buddhism, Taoism, and Islamic Sufism. Sidney H. Griffith, a professor of Early Christian Studies at the Catholic University of America, writes that Thomas Merton was heavily influenced by Louis Massignon (1883-1962), a French Catholic and scholar of Islam who studied and wrote about comparative mysticism. Massignon attributed his personal conversion “from a wayward life back to the practice”²³⁹ of Catholicism to the intercession of the Muslim mystic he was studying at the time, al-Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (858-922CE). Griffith writes that this

²³⁷ Gutierrez, 116.

²³⁸ Dreitzer, “Spiritualities of the Margins,” 7.

²³⁹ Sidney H. Griffith, “Mystics and Sufi Masters: Thomas Merton and Dialogue between Christians and Muslims,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15, no. 3 (July 2004): 300.

experience of “a compassionate encounter with another, a seeker of the God of Abraham in a religious tradition other than Judaism or Christianity ... open[ing] a way for one to reach God in one’s own heart”²⁴⁰ greatly impacted Merton’s life by turning his attention to other religions; Herbert Mason, a friend of both Massignon and Merton, said of Merton, “Hallaj and Massignon himself struck him deeply as ‘knowing the way.’”²⁴¹

Characteristics of Merton’s spirituality

While it is not possible to know precisely how Merton would have defined “the way” from his correspondence, poetry, and lectures on Sufism (his interest in Sufism only captures a part of his significant work), they certainly provide a glimpse into his conception of the spiritual journey. According to religious scholar Burton B. Thurston, Merton saw points of resonance between the teachings of Ḥallāj and his own experience of monastic life. One point of resonance was in Ḥallāj’s teaching that “the more God loves a person, the more He will test that person.”²⁴² Thurston wrote, “Merton looked upon the trials as a mark of the friend of God. ‘If you are a friend of God you are going to get special treatment. You are going to get a hard time but you will also have a good time.... There is not any consolation that has not been prepared by real rugged suffering.’”²⁴³ Merton evidently found numerous other points of resonance between Sufi and Christian teachings. In a lecture to some Alaskan nuns, Merton said, “The heart is a faculty by which man knows God and there Sufism develops the heart. This is a very important concept in the contemplative life, both in Sufism and in the Christian tradition: To develop a heart that

²⁴⁰ Griffith, 300.

²⁴¹ Griffith, 301.

²⁴² Burton B. Thurston, “Merton’s Reflections on Sufism,” in *Merton & Sufism: The Untold Story: A Complete Compendium*, eds. Rob Baker and Gray Henry (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005), 35.

²⁴³ Burton Thurston, 35.

knows God, not just a heart that loves God, but a heart that knows God.”²⁴⁴ From listening to Merton’s lectures on Sufism, religious scholar Rasoul Sorkhabi concludes that Merton was also “fascinated” with Sufi teachings about the following:

- the “straight path” (Islam) ... simply a total surrender to and total trust in God;
- an elaborate spiritual psychology of “stations” (attainment through effort) and “states” (gifts from God); and
- dissolution and death of “Self” (*fana*) and living in truth and union with God (“It is not self-extinction in order to become lost. It is not losing in order to find oneself. According to the Gospel, ‘He who would lose his life for My sake shall find it’”).²⁴⁵

On this topic of spiritual traveling through stations by which one reaches *fana*, i.e., annihilation of the self and union with God, Merton seems to find resonance with the work of Iranian Muslim-American psychologist Reza Arasteh. In explanation of Arasteh’s discussion of maturation, Merton explained Arasteh’s term “maturation” as meaning that “one who is ‘fully born’ has an entirely ‘inner experience of life.’ He apprehends his life fully and wholly from an inner ground that is at once more universal than the empirical ego and yet entirely his own.”²⁴⁶

Merton’s explanation of maturation is revealing about his perception of spirituality:

The state of insight which final integration implies is an openness, an ‘emptiness,’ a ‘poverty’ similar to those described in such detail not only by the Rhenish mystics, by St. John of the Cross, by the early Franciscans, but also by the Sufis, the early Taoist masters and Zen Buddhists. Final integration implies the void, poverty and nonaction which leave one entirely docile to the ‘Spirit’ and hence a potential instrument for unusual creativity.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: Prelude to the Asian Journal* (New York: New Direction, 1989), 153-154. Quoted in Rasoul Sorkhabi, “Thomas Merton’s Encounter with Sufism,” *Interreligious insight: a journal of dialogue and engagement* 6, no. 4 (2008): 31.

²⁴⁵ Sorkhabi, 28-29.

²⁴⁶ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 225. Quoted in Griffith, 310.

²⁴⁷ Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 225. Quoted in Griffith, 310.

This theme of “emptiness” that comes with “final integration” occurs elsewhere in Merton’s work. In his introductory note to “Readings from Ibn Abbad,” Merton notes that some scholars believe that St. John of the Cross was influenced by the Qur’ānic scholar and Sufi theologian Ibn ‘Abbad of Ronda (1332-1390), who taught about his experience of the “Night of Desolation.” Merton’s self-described “meditative and poetic notations” seem to indicate an alignment of his own views with those of Ibn ‘Abbad and those of St. John of the Cross’s regarding the “Dark Night of Soul.” On this topic, Merton wrote:

For the Servant of God
Consolation is the place of danger
Where he may be deluded
(Accepting only what he sees,
Experiences, or knows)
But desolation is his home:
For in desolation he is seized by God
And entirely taken over into God,
In darkness, in emptiness,
In loss, in death of self.
Then the self is only ashes. Not even ashes!²⁴⁸

This same concept is echoed in the following excerpt from Merton’s poem on the Night of Destiny (the night when the first verses of the Qur’ān were revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad, blessings and peace be upon him, commemorated every year during the last ten days of Ramadan):

My love is darkness!
Only in the Void
Are all ways one:
Only in the night
Are all the lost
Found.
In my ending is my meaning.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ Thomas Merton, “Merton’s Sufi Poems-Readings from Ibn Abbad,” in *Merton & Sufism: The Untold Story: A Complete Compendium*, eds. Rob Baker and Gray Henry (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005), 290.

²⁴⁹ Merton, “Merton’s Sufi Poems-The Night of Destiny” in *Merton & Sufism: The Untold Story: A Complete Compendium*, eds. Rob Baker and Gray Henry (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005), 304.

From Merton's own description, it also seems likely that his perception of spirituality was influenced by his meeting Sidi Abdeslam [abd-as-salaam], an Algerian Sufi of whom Merton wrote, "We had a true Sufi master from Algeria here. A most remarkable person. It was like meeting a Desert Father or someone out of the Bible."²⁵⁰ After their meeting, Sidi Abdeslam wrote Merton a letter (February 14, 1967) in which he asked if Merton "had yet set aside the distraction of words, his own words and those of others, in order to realize the mystical union."²⁵¹ Abdeslam also advised Merton that "what is best is what is not said."²⁵² Later, Merton seems to echo Abdeslam's advice, reflecting his own integration of this Sufi master's guidance with his own experience.

Merton read and reviewed Martin Lings book *A Moslem Saint of the Twentieth Century* (1961) about Algerian Sufi Shaikh Ahmad al-Alawi. Of his experience with the book, Merton said, "It is quite obvious that with someone like Shaikh Ahmad, I speak with the same language and indeed have a great deal more in common than I do with the majority of my contemporaries in this country' (HGL, p. 55)," and "the book was an inspiration to me and I often think of this great man with veneration. He was so perfectly so right in his spirituality. Certainly a great saint and a man full of the Holy Spirit. May God be praised for having given us one such, in a time when we need many saints' (HGL, p. 454)."²⁵³

While many Christian scholars define spirituality in Christian-specific terms, especially in relation to the Trinity, Merton's idea of spirituality seems to be inclusive of both his belief in the Trinity as well as others' beliefs in non-Christian religions. In a January 18, 1962, letter to

²⁵⁰ Thomas Merton, *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002), 144-145. Quoted in Griffith, 302.

²⁵¹ Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 468. Quoted in Griffith, 302.

²⁵² Thomas Merton, "Learning to Love," 200, in Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 468. Quoted in Griffith, 302.

²⁵³ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love. The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985). Quoted in Sorkhabi, 26.

Czeslaw Milosz, Merton wrote, “I cannot be Catholic unless it is made quite clear to the world that I am a Jew and a Moslem, unless I am execrated as a Buddhist and denounced for having undermined all that this comfortable and social Catholicism stands for.”²⁵⁴ In a June 28, 1964, letter, Merton wrote, “How can one be in contact with the great thinkers and men of prayer of the various religions without recognizing that these men have known God and have loved Him because they recognized themselves loved by Him?”²⁵⁵ Whether correctly or incorrectly, Islamic studies professor Seyyed Hossin Nasr opines that Merton’s treatment of other religions, including non-theistic religions, indicates that Merton was “acknowledging the truth of the ‘transcendent unity of religions’ to use the term made famous by Fithjob Schuon.”²⁵⁶

One of the most telling statements revealing Merton’s sentiments is found in his correspondence with Abdul Aziz, a Pakistani Muslim who read Merton’s *The Ascent to Truth* and initiated correspondence with him; Merton wrote to Abdul Aziz, “‘We must strive more and more to be universal in our interests and in our zeal for the glory of the One God, and may His Name be magnified forever in us’ (HGL, 55).”²⁵⁷ As this statement demonstrates, Merton’s correspondence indicates that he was more interested in points of resonance between religions than in focusing on religious differences. In establishing his sense of common ground between Christianity and Islam, he wrote to Abdul Aziz in a June 2, 1963, “‘I can certainly join you with my whole heart in confessing the One God (*Tawhid*) with all my heart.’ He then continues, ‘I

²⁵⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. C.M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), 79. Quoted in Griffith, 301.

²⁵⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, 1985), 58. Quoted in Griffith, 305.

²⁵⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “What Attracted Merton to Sufism,” in *Merton & Sufism: The Untold Story: A Complete Compendium*, eds. Rob Baker and Gray Henry (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005), 12.

²⁵⁷ Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 55. Quoted in Bonnie Thurston, “Thomas Merton’s Interest in Islam: The Example of Dhikr,” 48-49.

believe with you also in the angels, in revelation, in the Prophets, the Life to Come, the Law, and the Resurrection.”²⁵⁸

On the potentially divisive subject of salvation, Merton wrote in an October 18, 1963, letter: “I think that all men who believe in One God Who is the Father of all and Who wills all to be saved, will certainly be saved if they do His will.”²⁵⁹ In this same letter, Merton says of the Trinity that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit “do not imply three numerically separate beings’ but ‘represent different relations’ of One God. He then emphasizes ‘the supreme transcendent Unity of God, and the fact that there is no other with Him or beside Him.”²⁶⁰ Merton later repeats this same salvific idea:

Obviously the destiny of each individual person is a matter of his personal response to the truth and to the manifestation of God’s will to him, and not merely a matter of belonging to this or that organization. Hence it follows that any man who follows his faith and his conscience, and responds truthfully and sincerely to what he believes to be the manifestation of the will of God, cannot help being saved by God.”²⁶¹

Merton’s Spiritual Theology and Spiritual Anthropology

Of his correspondence with Abdul Aziz, Merton said, “There is no question in my mind that the mercy and bounty of God are very clear in the inspiration which has brought about our correspondence, and His angels certainly have their part to play in this.”²⁶² From this statement we can conclude that Merton sees God as merciful, generous, and taking an active, supportive role in the lives of his worshippers through angels. Merton’s descriptions of this correspondence provide a sense of the value he placed on the correspondence as well as a sense of Merton’s perception of God as merciful, loving and generous; he ended his October 18, 1963, letter to

²⁵⁸ Sorkhabi, 24.

²⁵⁹ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 57. Quoted in Griffith, 307.

²⁶⁰ Sorkhabi, 24.

²⁶¹ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 58. Quoted in Griffith, 305-306.

²⁶² Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 46. Quoted in Griffith, 304.

Abdul Aziz with the following: “I believe that our friendship is a blessing from God that will bring much light to us both, and help Him to be made known through us. All glory and praise be to Him Who shows Himself in all things infinitely merciful and a lover of all that He has created.”²⁶³ Merton also conveys his perception of God as loving in a lecture in which he quotes the renowned Islamic scholar and mystic Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165-1240): “if it were not for this love, the world would never appear in its concrete existence.”²⁶⁴ And, in language that echoes Abdeslam’s advice to Merton regarding the distraction of words, Merton reveals his approach to inter-religious dialogue, his perception of spirituality, his perception of God as the giver of divine light, and his perception of the human being as the receptacle who carries and experiences that light:

Personally, in matters where dogmatic beliefs differ, I think that controversy is of little value because it takes us away from the spiritual realities into the realm of words and ideas. In the realm of realities we may have a great deal in common, whereas in words there are apt to be infinite complexities and subtleties which are beyond resolution. It is, however, important, I think, to try to understand the beliefs of other religions. But much more important is the sharing of the experience of divine light, and first of all the light that God gives us even as the Creator and Ruler of the Universe. It is here that the area of fruitful dialogue exists between Christianity and Islam.²⁶⁵

Similarly, the following excerpt from one of Merton’s spiritual logs regarding contemplative prayer reveals both his perception of God as loving and his perception of the human being’s divine nature: “contemplative prayer is the recognition that we are the Sons of God, an experience of Who He is, and of His love for us, flowing from the operation of that love in us.... He makes us realize at least obscurely that it is He who is praying in us with a love too deep and too secret for us to comprehend.”²⁶⁶ Merton’s perception of the human being in these

²⁶³ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 57-58. Quoted in Griffith, 304.

²⁶⁴ Sorkhabi, 28.

²⁶⁵ Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 54. Quoted in Griffith, 306.

²⁶⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1953), 291. Quoted in Burton Thurston, 36.

statements corresponds to the Islamic concept of *fitra*, i.e., that humanity's primordial nature is innate goodness and sacredness.

In one of his lectures, Merton offered the following summation of Sufism: Especially in Sufism, there is this idea that we come from God, that's why we desire to return to Him, because God is where we belong. It's in Him that we are Real and that away from Him we are not real, and that His Reality is The Reality and any other reality is only a sham and any other reality is only a lie. And this runs through the Bible.²⁶⁷

Merton repeats this concept in a journal entry: "at the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God.... This little point ... is the pure glory of God in us. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody."²⁶⁸ Merton also repeats this conception of the human in what Sorkhabi speculates are "probably Merton's last words on his encounter with Sufi spirituality;" Merton said, "Sufism looks at man as a heart and a spirit and a secret, and the secret is the deepest part. The secret of man is God's secret; therefore, it is in God."²⁶⁹

Significantly, when Merton was exposed to Sufism through the writing of Massignon, he was not only moved by it, he embarked on a sincere effort to learn more about it. In so doing, and in allowing himself to be influenced by this exploration, Merton has demonstrated that he truly respected and appreciated the diversity of spiritualities in the East and the West. Further, Merton demonstrated how spiritual seekers may relate to God and how they may relate to spiritualities other than their own. Merton's spirituality is one that is heart-centered, one that involves trust and surrender to a loving and merciful God, one that seeks to achieve death to self and birth into God, and one that reveres God's supreme unity. Merton's spirituality is one in

²⁶⁷ Sorkhabi, 29.

²⁶⁸ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 158. Quoted in Griffith, 313.

²⁶⁹ Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: Prelude to the Asian Journal*, 153-154. Quoted in Sorkhabi, 31.

which salvation, sainthood, and being full of the Holy Spirit are not limited to Christianity; rather, Merton's spirituality seems to acknowledge the universality of religions. As such, the spirituality revealed in his prolific work is an example for all students seeking intimacy with the Divine or striving to practice "the Presence of Ultimate Mystery."²⁷⁰

Differences Between My Definition of Spirituality and Definitions of Christian Spirituality

The most obvious point of difference between my definitions of spirituality personally and generally and the definitions cited above relates to how *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* defines spirituality as being "both Christological and trinitarian."²⁷¹ This difference holds true for Schneiders's, Holt's and Dreitcer's definitions of Christian spirituality as well. As definitions of Christian spirituality, they are based on who Jesus is to Christians; as such, these definitions are not inclusive of other religions. Simply put, comparing these definitions is like the saying about comparing apples and oranges – neither my definition of spirituality personally nor my definition of spirituality generally are definitions of Christian spirituality. That said, my definition seems to accord better with the general definitions in *Studying Christian Spirituality* that speak of "transformation ... [as the] very heart of the enterprise of Christian spirituality."²⁷² Along these lines, the editors of the series "Ethical and Religious Classics of the East and West" offer this conclusion regarding the convergence between Christian and non-Christian spiritualities:

there is an enormous amount of common ground in the great religions, concerning, too, the most fundamental matters. There is frequent agreement on the Divine Nature; God is the One, Self-subsisting Reality, knowing Himself, and therefore loving and rejoicing in Himself. Nature and finite spirits are in some way subordinate kinds of Being, or merely appearances of the Divine, the One. The three stages of the way of man's approach or

²⁷⁰ Dreitcer, "Notes on 'Spirituality and Spirituality Studies,'" 1.

²⁷¹ Maas and O'Donnell, 17.

²⁷² Perrin, 13.

return to God are in essence the same in Christian and non-Christian teaching: an ethical stage, the one of knowledge and love, leading to the mystical union of the soul with God.²⁷³

²⁷³ McCarthy, "Introduction," 50, in response to the "General Introduction" by the editors of the series *Ethical and Religious Classics of the East and West*.

Chapter 3

Spiritual Formation Practices in Christianity and Islam

Introduction

As my attempt to define Islamic spirituality in general terms is informed by being a student of Shadhiliyya Sufism and a Muslim who strives to follow the Shafi'i school of Sunni jurisprudence, so also is my attempt to provide an overview of spiritual formation practices. For example, in addressing Islamic ritual prayer, I will stick to what I know, i.e., how *ṣalāt* (or *salah*) is performed by Sunni Muslims in the Shafi'i school. I will not attempt to be so comprehensive as to delineate the differences between how *salah* is performed according to the other major Sunni schools (Hanafi, Malik, Hanbali), the major Shi'a schools (Ja'fari, Zaidi), or the other schools. Likewise, I will not attempt to be so comprehensive as to delineate the differences between the *sunna* prayers of Sunni Muslims and the *nafla* (supererogatory, i.e., extra, non-compulsory) prayers of Shi'i Muslims. The same approach holds true for Christian practices; I will not attempt to delineate protestant, orthodox, catholic, restoration, or other denominational differences. Along these same lines, I will not attempt to include an overview of spiritual formation practices that is so comprehensive as to include all the possibilities. The term spiritual formation is so broad that it can be used to include any activity that contributes to a person's faith, purification/sanctification, efforts to reconcile religious belief with action in daily life, self-discipline/self-improvement/character growth, acquisition of beneficial knowledge, performance of good deeds, acts of worship, etc. So, spiritual formation practices could include anything from attending a religious school, to studying sacred texts, attending worship services, receiving sacraments, performing liturgy, praying, giving charity, serving others, and engaging in contemplative practices, such as meditation. Thus, I will only attempt to highlight those spiritual

formation practices that have been a key part of my own experience and those that are highlighted by a few leading figures in their respective fields, like Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, Thomas Merton, and a few contemporary scholars.

Overview of Islamic Spiritual Formation Practices

In speaking of the path to “realization or actualization of the Mercy,” Islamic scholar Martin Lings writes that ‘walking’ this path “means taking advantage of those possibilities of Mercy which are immediately available, namely the outer formal aspects of religion.”²⁷⁴ Lings points us to the starting point of Islamic spiritual formation as the outer formal aspects of religion – namely, the pillars of Islam – the testimony of faith (*shahādah*), the ritual prayers (*ṣalāt* or *salah*), charity (*zakat*), fasting during the month of Ramadan (*sawm*), and the pilgrimage (*hajj*). In *Essential Islam: A Comprehensive Guide to Belief and Practice*, professor of religion and philosophy Diane Morgan identifies the essential Islamic practices as observation of the five pillars of Islam. Of these, the second pillar – the compulsory Islamic prayer (*ṣalāt*) – plays a primary role, a role that is referenced in Qur’ān 29:45: “Convey [unto others] whatever of this divine writ has been revealed unto thee, and be constant in prayer: for, behold, prayer restrains [man] from loathsome deeds and from all that runs counter to reason; and remembrance of God is indeed the greatest [good].” Indeed, God instructs humankind to be steadfast in prayer: “Verily, I – I alone – am God; there is no deity save Me. Hence, worship Me alone, and be constant in prayer, so as to remember Me!” (Qur’ān 10:14). Numerous *ḥadīth*, a report or account of the words or deeds of the Prophet Muḥammad, may Allah’s blessings and peace be upon him, relate the importance of the ritual prayer as the central act of worship, as the most

²⁷⁴ Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 21.

virtuous deed, as purification of the worshipper, as an expiation of sins, as a protection from misdeeds, etc. To get a glimpse into why Muslims perform the ritual prayer, we need to first look to its origin in the miraculous night journey of the Prophet, blessings and peace be upon him, that is referenced in Qur’ān 17:1, 53:8-10, and 53:13-18. The *ḥadīth* accounts of this journey relate that God tells Muḥammad that his followers must perform the ritual prayer 50 times a day. After Moses encourages him to do so, Muḥammad goes back to God nine times until God reduces the duty to five daily prayers. Thus, the five daily prayers are considered obligatory.

Before exploring the ritual prayer further, we need to establish a framework for discussion of spiritual formation practices. The framework used by spiritual formation professor Andrew Dreitcer involves what he calls “spiritual capacities” to refer to the human abilities that are “engaged in a significant way” when a person does a particular spiritual formation practice.²⁷⁵ These capacities include action, attention, awareness, intention, imagination, meaning-making, relationality, release, etc. Of these, Dreitcer considers three to be “foundational capacities,” i.e., capacities that are present in every spiritual practice; they are intention, awareness, and attention. *Intention* relates to the person’s aim for engaging in the spiritual practice, and the actions that come from setting that intention. *Awareness* relates to “the ability to notice whatever is happening in any moment” both in the external world as well as in our internal world, i.e., our “thoughts, feelings, impulses, mental pictures, mental conversations.”²⁷⁶ *Attention* refers to “focus[ing] for an extended period.”²⁷⁷ While these three capacities are the foundation for each spiritual practice, some practices emphasize one over another, and many

²⁷⁵ Andrew Dreitcer, “Contemplative Capacities and STS Explained” (Handout received in Multi-Religious Contemplative Capacities with Professor Andrew Dreitcer, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California, Feb. 7, 2019), 1.

²⁷⁶ Andrew Dreitcer, *Living Compassion: Loving Like Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2017), 37.

²⁷⁷ Dreitcer, *Living Compassion*, 38.

practices involve additional capacities, like *release* of distracting thoughts. For example, the Christian practice of Centering Prayer calls for an *intention* to be available to the presence of God. Centering Prayer and other practices that use a mantra emphasize the foundational capacity of *attention*, whereas the Christian Ignatian practice of the Awareness Examen emphasizes the foundational capacity of *awareness*. Christian and Islamic practices alike engage spiritual capacities. For example, practices in both religions engage *relationality* by serving to deepen one's relationship to God. Providing an overview of spiritual formation practices in both Islam and Christianity prevents applying this framework to every practice mentioned below. Accordingly, I will use the framework to explore one practice from each religion, and provide an overview of the remaining practices.

With *ṣalāt*, as with many spiritual formation practices, the worshipper's *intention* is of primary importance. Firstly, the worshipper's intention is obedience to God through fulfillment of the obligation that was given to the Prophet, blessings and peace be upon him, on the night journey. Further, the worshipper's intention in *ṣalāt* is to offer the prayer for the sake of God alone and to be absent from everything other than God. With the Islamic ritual prayer, the human capacity for external *action* is engaged through making specific physical movements, assuming specific positions, and reciting passages from the Qur'ān. The prayer begins with the proclamation that God is great (*takbīr*), which engages the capacity for *meaning-making* as the worshipper conceptualizes this statement as an act of consecration that connotes an awareness of God's Magnificence and that this Magnificence should be expressed. (*Meaning-making* is a psychological term referring to how people make sense of their lives; I use the term to refer to the spiritual significance people attribute to the phenomena of their spiritual and religious lives, and the conceptualizations that underly those attributions.) Then the worshipper stands to recite

verses of the Qur'ān, beginning with the *Fātiḥah*, the opening chapter. This recitation involves the capacity for *relationality* in that the worshipper strives to deepen her relationship with God through the recitation as if engaging in a loving conversation in which the worshipper glorifies God and submits to Him. The recitation also involves the capacity for *meaning-making* as it is perceived as a means of opening a metaphorical door to God's fulfilling the worshipper's needs.

In *What is Sufism?*, English Islamic scholar Martin Lings implies that some worshippers perform their religious observances as solely an outer act while a Sufi performs those same observances as an embodiment of specialized knowledge: “even those rites which the mystic shares with the rest of his community, and which he too needs for the balance of his soul, are not performed by him exoterically as others perform them, but from the same profound esoteric point of view which characterizes all his rites and which he is methodically forbidden to forsake.”²⁷⁸ Lings's idea that a worshipper's exoteric or esoteric approach to the *ṣalāt* will impact her point of view in performing the ritual prayer seems valid. To greater or lesser degrees in accordance with that exoteric or esoteric approach, the *actions* of the ritual prayer are imbued with an intertwining of the capacities of *attention* as the worshipper focuses on the words of the Qur'ān and their meaning, with other spiritual capacities, such as *intention*, *relationality*, and *meaning-making*. For example, the second part of the round of prayer (*rakat*) involves the *action* of bowing down with hands on knees; for those Muslims performing the prayer from a “profound esoteric point of view,” this bowing down involves *meaning-making* as it symbolizes complete immersion in God, i.e., annihilation of self.

This intertwining of capacities, to varying degrees in accordance with the worshipper's approach, holds true for the remaining movements of the practice. The third movement is the

²⁷⁸ Lings, 14.

action of prostrating with the forehead and nose on the floor and elbows outward in a posture of submission to God to signify the spiritual journey from being a contingently existent human to being non-existent in an extinction of individual essence in God's Essence. A worshipper performing the prayer from an esoteric view may perform the prayer with the *intention* to actualize this journey from contingent existence to extinction in God's Essence. For such a worshipper, the worshipper is seeking to surrender completely, or in other words, to sacrifice herself; thus this action is intertwined with the worshipper's *intention*, with the meaning she attaches to the movement (*meaning-making*), as well as the *relationality* aspect of lovingly performing the action to symbolize giving everything to God. The fourth movement is to kneel with the feet folded under the body (*action*) to signify God's bringing His servant "back to existence" (*intention, meaning-making, relationality*).²⁷⁹ The remaining movements of the prayer also demonstrate this interplay between *action, intention, meaning-making, and relationality*. The kneeling position is followed by a second prostration to signify God extinguishing His worshipper again to "confirm his prostration."²⁸⁰ In the last position of the prayer, the worshipper offers the greeting of "God's blessing and peace be upon you," once while turning to the right and once turning to the left, as a greeting to the angel sitting on the worshipper's right and the angel sitting on the worshipper's left. This sitting symbolizes being at a "mid-point" between existence and non-existence, of being with both the Creator and the creation.²⁸¹ The greeting to the angels reminds the worshippers of God's support in the unseen world as well as the connection to all the worshippers throughout the seen and unseen worlds.

²⁷⁹ Maryam Muḥammad Abdullah, *The Ocean of the Mercy: The Life of the Prophet Muḥammad, May the prayers and peace of Allah be upon him* (Canada: Sidi Muḥammad Press, 2005), 132.

²⁸⁰ Abdullah, 132.

²⁸¹ Abdullah, 132.

Of course, performing the ritual prayer also requires the capacity for *awareness*, i.e., for perceiving what is happening within the worshipper as well as what is happening around the worshipper. Internal *awareness* fosters the worshipper's self-monitoring of *attention*, i.e., the sustained focus on the Qur'ānic recitation and its meaning. External *awareness* is especially engaged when praying with others as certain physical actions, such as praying in straight lines, standing shoulder-to-shoulder, and following the actions of the person leading the prayer, are considered part of praying correctly. External *awareness* is also involved when performing the ritual prayer in a public place, like an airport, or outside, as is prudent for personal safety.

When I perform *ṣalāt*, I also engage the capacity for *imagination* as a means of helping focus my *attention* on the meaning of what is being recited and my *intention* to maintain this focus. For example, when I recite from the *Fātiḥah* (Qur'ān 1:1-7) the line interpreted as "All praise is due to God alone, the Sustainer of all the worlds," I imagine the planets and universes extending infinitely outward, and I imagine an inner and downward progression of increasingly subtle worlds. Likewise, when I recite the line interpreted as "Guide us [to] the straight way," I imagine my heart and soul being pulled toward the *Kaaba* (the most sacred site in Islam, metaphorically referred to as the House of God) as if the Name of Allah is a powerful magnet pulling me straight to my spiritual home. I suspect that other Muslims also engage the capacity for *imagination* with great variance both in the degree to which they engage their imagination and the manner in which they do so in their *ṣalāt*. This interplay of multiple spiritual capacities during the ritual prayer was beautifully described by Islamic scholar Sulaiman Nadwi, who described the prayer as the following:

the expression of devotedness by the created to his Creator with his whole being, i.e., heart, tongue, feet and hands; it is the remembrance of the Most Merciful and the Most Gracious; it is the thanksgiving for His limitless favors; it is the praise and adoration for the eternal beauty of His creation and acknowledgement of His Unity and Greatness; it is

the communication of soul with the Beloved Lord; it is the complete obeisance by body and soul to the Master; it is the dedication of one's internal feelings; it is the natural music of one's heart-string; is the tie of relationship between the Creator and the created and the latter's strong bond of devoutness; it is the comfort for the agitated and uneasy mind; it is the solace for the restless soul; it is the remedy for the hopeless heart; it is the natural internal call of a receptive and sensitive mind; it is the purpose of life and the essence of existence.²⁸²

Before performing the ritual prayer, the worshipper must perform the *actions* of *wudu* (an ablution process of washing the body with clean water). Many scholars discuss *wudu* solely in its relation to performing the ritual prayer rather than as its own practice. While *wudu* is a requirement for *ṣalāt*, and is a requirement for recitation of the Qur'ān, I would argue that maintaining the state of *wudu* is also its own spiritual formation practice. The 'state of *wudu*,' i.e., the state of purification or cleanliness, is broken by bodily discharge or sleeping. My primary Islamic teacher, Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa'i, taught his students not to let an hour go by while not in the state of *wudu*. Maintaining the state of *wudu* – repeating the ablution process every time the state is broken by bodily discharge, such as urination, etc. – is its own reward in terms of spiritual benefits.

As with the ritual prayer, the worshipper's *intention* is key in this ritual cleansing and, as with the ritual prayer, the worshipper's first intention is obedience to God. Qur'ān 5:6 establishes this obligation and the *actions* associated with it:

O YOU who have attained to faith! When you are about to pray, wash your face, and your hands and arms up to the elbows, and pass your [wet] hands lightly over your head, and [wash] your feet up to the ankles. And if you are in a state requiring total ablution, purify yourselves. But if you are ill, or are traveling, or have just satisfied a want of nature, or have cohabited with a woman, and can find no water – then take resort to pure dust, passing therewith lightly over your face and your hands.

²⁸² Sulaiman Nadwi, *Worship in Islam: Translation of the Portion of Worships in Siratun Nabi* (Karachi: Darul Ishaat, 1994), quoted in Aisha Hamdan, "A Comprehensive Contemplative Approach from the Islamic Tradition," in *Contemplative Practices in Action: Spirituality, Meditation, and Health*, ed. Thomas G. Plante, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 125-126.

Al-Ghazālī stresses the importance of the worshipper’s *intention* for ablution, instructing his pupils to “make the intention of lifting the state of impurity or of fulfilling the requirements to be able to pray. You must make the intention before washing your face; without this intention, the ablution is not valid.”²⁸³ Al-Ghazālī’s instruction includes the advice to offer prayers that coincide with the physical *actions*; for example, he instructs his pupils to say “O Allah, give me my book of deeds in my right hand and judge me with leniency” when washing the right arm.²⁸⁴ Qur’ān 5:6 also relates aspects of the *meaning-making*, *relationality* and *release* spiritual capacities associated with ablution; it continues: “God does not want to impose any hardship on you, but wants to make you pure, and to bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings, so that you might have cause to be grateful.” Al-Ghazālī explains that the worshipper’s *release* of mistakes accompanies God’s gift of purification and reward, which are a means of drawing nearer to God: “Whoever makes these supplications in his ablution will have all his sins depart from his limbs. His ablution will be stamped with a seal of approval, and will ascend to beneath the Throne, where it will stay, glorifying Allah Most High and exalting Him. The reward of this will continue to be written for him until the Day of Judgment.”²⁸⁵ A *ḥadīth* similarly relates the spiritual benefit of the ablution and the interplay of the capacities of *attention*, *intention*, *relationality*, and *meaning-making*: “Anyone who performs ablution thoroughly, and says, ‘I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, He is One, there is no associate with Him, and that Muhammad is His servant and His messenger; O Allah! Make me one of those who turn to You

²⁸³ Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, trans. Mashhad Al-Allaf (London: White Thread Press, 2010), 30.

²⁸⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, 32.

²⁸⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, 34.

again and again and make me of those who purify themselves,’ the eight doors of paradise are opened to him; he enters by whichever door he pleases.”²⁸⁶

When addressing the topic of contemplative practices in Islam, a wide range of scholars point first to *ṣalāt*, second to *dhikr* (remembrance of God), and third to supplication. While many scholars may agree in pointing to the ritual prayer first and remembrance of God second, many disagree as to what constitutes *dhikr*. Aisha Hamdan (now Aisha Utz), an expert in psychology in Islam, posits that *dhikr* is of two types. The first form of *dhikr* is “the more formal or ritualized form wherein the individual remembers Allah at specific times and occasions ... using the precise words as they were transmitted by Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him).”²⁸⁷ Per Hamdan/Utz, this type of formalized *dhikr* includes remembering Allah “following each of the five daily prayers, ... before and after eating, upon entering or leaving the house, upon entering or leaving the mosque, upon entering or leaving the bathroom, after sneezing, etc.”²⁸⁸ What Hamdan/Utz is referring to here is following the *sunnah*, i.e., following the example of the Prophet Muhammad in his actions and words both in his worship and in activities of daily living. In addition to the examples Hamdan/Utz lists, *sunnah* includes such specifics as the *duas* (prayers) the Prophet said when passing through doors, getting dressed starting with the right foot, getting undressed starting with the left foot, etc.; this type of *dhikr* includes everything from personal hygiene to table manners. The second type of *dhikr* Hamdan/Utz refers to is “the constant, unwavering form in which the individual is continuously mindful of Allah as he conducts his daily routine and activities;” she associates this form of *dhikr* with a “higher level of

²⁸⁶ Diane Morgan, *Essential Islam: A Comprehensive Guide to Belief and Practice* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 61.

²⁸⁷ Hamdan, 131.

²⁸⁸ Hamdan, 131.

spiritual development ... achieved by remembering the true purpose of life and our ultimate goal, which is the Hereafter.”²⁸⁹

In his consideration of Islamic practices, theologian Zeki Saritoprak cites the following attributes and actions as key to Islamic spiritual practices:

- thankfulness that “turns regular actions into actions of worship;”²⁹⁰
- repentance for wrongdoing;
- rectifying the soul, i.e., undertaking the inner spiritual *jihad*;
- *dhikr* with *Subhan Allah* (Glory be to God), *Al-hamdulilah* (Praise be to God), *La ila ha il Allah* (There is no god but God), and *Allahu Akbar* (God is Great);
- guarding the heart’s turning toward the angelic realm or the realm of the human’s clay nature;
- practicing patience;
- *taffakkur* (reflection or contemplation) on the signs of God in the creation, such as fruits, animals, honey, and the cycle of night and day, as well as the holy books and their stories, lessons, orders, prohibitions, etc.;
- night prayer and other voluntary prayers; and
- ascetism, especially eating, sleeping, and talking less in order to pray and worship more.

Depending on the school of thought a Muslim follows, repentance may take a variety of forms, such as repeating *astaghfiru-llāh al-aḍhim wa atūbu ‘ilayh* (I seek forgiveness of Allāh) or *astaghfiru-llāh al-aḍhim lā ilāha illā hū al ḥayy al qayyūm wa atūbu ‘ilayh* (forgive me Allāh,

²⁸⁹ Hamdan, 132.

²⁹⁰ Zeki Saritoprak, *Islamic Spirituality: Theology and Practice for the Modern World* (Published online: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 67.

All-mighty, other than Whom no deity exists, The Ever-living, Self-subsistent, and to Him I return repentant). It could also include repeating divine names associated with forgiveness, repentance, and pardon (*ya Ghaffur* [the Forgiver and Hider of Faults in the angelic and spiritual realms], *ya Ghaffār* [the Forgiving and Hider of Faults from the self], *ya Ghaffīr* [the Forgiver and Hider of Faults in the human realm], *ya Tawwab* [the Guide to Repentance], *ya Afuw* [the Pardonner]) on one's own behalf or on someone else's behalf.

In his notes to *The Message of the Qur'ān*, Muhammad Asad writes that “the Qur'ānic approach to all questions of faith, ethics and morality ... is echoed many times in expressions like ‘so that you might use your reason’ (*la'allakum ta'qilūn*), or ‘will you not, then, use your reason?’ (*a fa-lā ta'qilūn*), or ‘so that they might understand [the truth]’ (*la'allahum ya'fquhūn*), or ‘so that you might think’ (*la'allakum tatafakkarūn*); and ... in the oft-repeated declaration ... ‘for people who think’ (*li-qawmin yatafakkarūn*).”²⁹¹ As Asad points out, in these expressions God has repeatedly instructed humankind to use reason. In other words, God has made *taffakkur* (observation, reflection and contemplation) incumbent upon humanity and He has emphasized this responsibility again and again. In order to follow this divine instruction, Muslims strive to observe themselves, each other, and the world as a means for cultivating “the faculty of understanding based on conscious insight.”²⁹² For many Muslims *taffakkur* includes remembering one's mortality as a means of countering one's ego. Harith al-Muhasibi (781 AD – 857 AD), a teacher of the Sufi master Junayd Al-Baghdadi, advocated “continued remembrance and contemplation of the uncertainty of the appointed time and coming of death ... and the

²⁹¹ Muhammad Asad trans., *The Message of the Qur'ān* (London: The Book Foundation, 2003), 396.

²⁹² Asad, 396.

remembrance of those who were taken by sudden death”²⁹³ as preparation for standing before God on the Day of Resurrection so as to “meet his lord in a state of purity.”²⁹⁴

Islamic asceticism is a form of spiritual striving and purification that involves reduction of food, sleep, and speech, as well as limiting one’s associations with others to those persons who “have turned their faces to God and their backs toward this world.”²⁹⁵ For the 13th century Islamic mystic Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, sitting with these people, whom he calls “sound companions,” is a true form of spiritual striving because “the very sight of them wastes away the ego and annihilates it.... (F 234/241).”²⁹⁶ In his consideration of the teachings of the Persian Sufi Bāyazīd Bisṭāmī (804 AD – 874AD), religious scholar Michael Sells writes the following of asceticism: “the mystical knower (‘*ārif*) will renounce everything that distracts him from the one God. Asceticism is not and should not be a goal; it may be part of the process of giving up all distractions from the one God, the only goal and pursuit of the knower.”²⁹⁷ The practice of asceticism, and the spiritual struggle involved in countering the desires of the ego-self, are closely tied with *jihad* (inner spiritual struggle). Rūmī describes *jihad* as “abandonment of personal wishes and sensual desires,” calling it “the Greater Holy War. (F 130/140-141).”²⁹⁸ In his introduction to the teachings on unity by Abū L-Qāsim al-Junayd (one of the early saints of Islam), Sells describes *jihad* as “constantly opposing one’s ego-self.”²⁹⁹ French scholar Tayeb

²⁹³ Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur’an, Mi’raj, Poetic and Theological Writing* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 181.

²⁹⁴ Harith Muhasibi, *Kitāb al-Ri’āya Liḥuqūq Allāh*, (London: Luzac, 1940), 109-110/223-224, quoted in Sells, 183.

²⁹⁵ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Love* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1983), 155.

²⁹⁶ Chittick, 155.

²⁹⁷ Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur’an, Mi’raj, Poetic and Theological Writing* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 234.

²⁹⁸ Chittick, 154.

²⁹⁹ Sells, 253.

Chourief offers the advice of Moroccan Sufi Muhammad al-Arabī al-Darqāwī (1760-1823) for the spiritual struggle:

If you wish your path to be shortened in order to attain realization (*taḥqīq*) swiftly, hold fast to the obligatory acts of worship (*wājibāt*) and to what is particularly recommended concerning voluntary observances (*nawāfil*); learn outer knowledge (*al'ilm al-zāhir*) as is indispensable for worshipping God, but do not linger on it, since you are not required to study this deeply. What has to be deepened is inner knowledge. Furthermore, disobey your [carnal] soul and you will see marvels!” Shaykh al-Darqāwī (*Rasā'il*, letter 2, p. 33).³⁰⁰

In *The Four Pillars of Spiritual Transformation*, renowned Islamic scholar and mystic Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165-1240) describes his prescription for a successful *jihad* as being silence, seclusion, hunger, and vigilance. He describes silence as being of both the tongue and the heart, as a “refraining from all thought occurring in the soul that concerns any created thing.”³⁰¹ He describes seclusion as “not associating physically with others” and “having no contact with created things in one’s heart.”³⁰² Hunger is a matter of reducing the quantity of food eaten to maintain an empty stomach. He describes vigilance as “awakening from the sleep of forgetfulness and seeking contemplation,” “the desire to maintain the spiritual intention in the heart to pursue the quest for night-converse,” and “cultivat[ing] the present moment,”³⁰³ all of which are means of acquiring spiritual knowledge.

Asceticism and *jihad*, as with other practices like repentance and reflection are imbued with the *dhikr* of being continually mindful of God. This mindfulness of God imbues the ritualized prayer as well as additional supplications. As Muslims seek to emulate the Prophet, may Allah’s blessings and peace be upon him, they often offer the prayers that he is known to

³⁰⁰ Tayeb Chourief, *Spiritual Teachings of the Prophet* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 15.

³⁰¹ Muhyiddīn Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Four Pillars of Spiritual Transformation: The Adornment of the Spiritually Transformed*, trans. Stephen Hirstenstein (Oxford, UK: Anqa Publishing, 2008), 32-33.

³⁰² Ibn al-‘Arabī, 34.

³⁰³ Ibn al-‘Arabī, 37-38.

have made. Many Muslims supplement these with prayers made by the Companions, may Allah's blessings be on them, and prayers made by other prophets in the Holy Qur'ān as part of their supplications. Shaykh Al-Jamal al-Rifa'i also offered his students specific supplications and recitations for a variety of purposes, such as forgiveness, purification, protection, and discharging negative influences, which brings up the point that while some scholars put supplications in their own category, offering any form of prayer is a form of *dhikr*. Shaykh Al-Jamal Al-Rifa'i encouraged his students to engage in *khalwa* (retreat). These retreats can be all-night for a single night, for a few days, or for 40 days, like the retreats performed by Jesus, Moses, and numerous Sufi saints.

Dhikr in this general sense imbues all Islamic practices. In modern parlance, *dhikr* is often used in a more specific sense, as it was by Saritoprak, to refer to silent or vocalized recitation of an Islamic mantra/mantram. Imam Jamal Rahman offers a contemporary perspective on this form of *dhikr*:

A common practice is to choose a sacred word or verse and repeat it as often as possible during the course of the day: while commuting, while waiting for the elevator, while standing in line at the coffee shop. A favorite verse for Muslims is the statement, *La ila ha il Allah*. Literally meaning "There is no God but God," it also implies there is no reality aside from God, since God is the Source and Essence of all that is.... Another mantra, based on another set of prayers recommended by the Prophet, is *Subhan Allah, Al-hamdulilah, Allahu Akbar* (Glory be to God, Praise be to God, God is Great).³⁰⁴

In her discussion of contemplative practices in Islam, Hamdan/Utz cautions against repeating the word Allah or one of Allah's names as a form of *dhikr*; she refers to this practice as an "innovation," by which she connotes the Arabic term *bid'ah* (heretical doctrine or practice). Hamdan/Utz purports to be presenting "traditional Sunni Islam." Hamdan/Utz is a professor at the College of Medicine at King Saud Bin Abdulaziz University of Health Sciences in Riyadh,

³⁰⁴ Jamal Rahman, *Spiritual Gems of Islam: Insights & Practices from the Qur'an, Hadith, Rumi & Muslim Teaching Stories to Enlighten the Heart & Mind* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2013), 116.

Saudi Arabia. Because Saudi Arabia is where Wahhabism/Salafiyya is the dominant form of Islam and where required religious curriculum teaches Wahhabism/Salafiyya, which has been referred to as ‘ultraconservative’ by Muslims that follow other schools of thought, I am uncertain whether her position regarding repeating the word Allah is in fact representative of traditional Sunni Islam. Some conservative and ultraconservative Muslims believe that if a practice was not done by the Prophet himself, it is an innovation that should be avoided. Other Muslims criticize the logic behind the opinion that a practice that was not done by the Prophet himself is an innovation, pointing out that by this logic Muslims would not pray in modern buildings, engage in exegesis of the Qur’ān, evaluate the authenticity of *ḥadīth*, etc., all of which are widely accepted Islamic practices. This latter opinion is expressed by Nuh Ha Mim Keller, who writes that “Imam Shafi’i (d. 204/820) has said, ‘Anything which has a support (*mustanad*) from the *shari’a* is not *bid’a* [blameworthy innovation], even if the early Muslims did not do it (Ahmad al-Ghimari, *Tashnif al-adhan*, Cairo: Maktaba al-Khanji, n.d., 133).”³⁰⁵

The practice Hamdan/Utz cautions against, repetition of the Unifying Name (Allah), is one of the most emphasized forms of *dhikr* in Shadhiliyya Sufism. Islamic mystics engage in repeating Allah both silently and out loud, individually and in groups. This practice is often coupled with visualizing the Name Allah written in Arabic in front of them, in their hearts, in their mind’s eye and in their physical eyes. This practice is encouraged as a specific meditation-like practice, ideally for one hour during the last third of the night. It is also encouraged as an all-the-time practice as a way of managing one’s thoughts based on the idea that the only remedy to the thoughts of the mind, which are subject to corruption, is remembrance of the Name of God. Lings ties this practice to *ḥadīth*: “Calling on the Name of God, whether it be accompanied by

³⁰⁵ Nuh Ha Mim Keller, “How Would You Respond to the Claim that Sufism is Bid’a?” sunnah.org, accessed October 8, 2019, <http://sunnah.org/tasawwuf/sufisnk.htm>.

some other experience or not, is the most positive thing in all the world because it sets up the most powerful vibration towards the Heart. The Prophet said: ‘There is a polish for everything that taketh away rust; and the polish of the Heart is the invocation of Allah.’”³⁰⁶ French scholar Tayeb Chourief also ties this practice to *ḥadīth*, citing a report narrated by Abū a-Dardā’ and quoted by al-Bayhaqī: “Those who are given the highest spiritual degree are those who practice the invocation of God.”³⁰⁷ Islamic and Arabic scholar Victor Danne offers the Sufi shaykh Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Illāh’s connection between *ḥadīth* and *dhikr* in his translation of *The Book of Wisdom*: “God revealed to David: ‘O David, say to the truthful: Let them rejoice in Me, let them find joy in My invocation!’”³⁰⁸

Some Sufi teachers prescribe repetition of the Divine Names of God, such as *Al-Ghaffār* (the Forgiver), *Al-‘Alīm* (the All Knowing), *Ar-Raḥīm* (the Most Merciful), etc. The teacher often gives a combination of names that are specific to the student and situation, doing so based at least in part, on Qur’ān 7:180, which states, “And God’s [alone] are the attributes of perfection; invoke Him, then, by these....” Lings argues that this method of *dhikr* is a direct route to knowledge of God and acquiring the characteristics of that Divine Name: “the most direct of all, is to dwell in particular on one of these names, *Dhikru ‘Llāh*, the Remembrance of God, and to become like him [the Prophet] a personification of all that this name implies.”³⁰⁹ It is this type of *dhikr* that Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa’i prescribes as a means for progressing through the inner stages of human development along the spiritual journey referenced in the Qur’ān. For *nafs al-ammara* (the commanding self), the prescribed *dhikr* is *lā ilaha illa-llāh*. For *nafs al-lawamma*

³⁰⁶ Lings, 59.

³⁰⁷ Tayeb Chourief, *Spiritual Teachings of the Prophet* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 130.

³⁰⁸ Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Illāh, *Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Illāh The Book of Wisdom Kwaja Abdullah Ansari Intimate Conversations*, trans. Victor Danner and Wheeler M. Thackston (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 118.

³⁰⁹ Lings, 44.

(the blaming self), the prescribed *dhikr* is *Allah*. For *nafs al-mulhamah* (the inspired self), the prescribed *dhikr* is *Hū* (He). For *nafs al-muma'innah* (the certain self), the prescribed *dhikr* is *ya Haqq* (Oh Truth). For *nafs al-radiyah* (the content self), the prescribed *dhikr* is *Hayy* (Living). For *nafs al-mardiyah* (the gratified self), the prescribed *dhikr* is *Al-Qayyūm* (The Self-subsisting). For *nafs al-kamila* (the completed self), the prescribed *dhikr* is *Al-Qahhār* (The Prevailing, the Invincible).

Remembrance of God may take other forms as well. Many Muslims and Sufis repeat phrases from the Qur'ān or other invocations in both individual, silent, and group *dhikr*, such as the following:

- *SubhanAllahi wa biHamdihi, Subhan-Allahi 'l-'adheem* (Glory be to Allah, and Praise be to Allah, the Supreme),
- *La illaha ilAllahu, wahdahu la shareeka lahu, la hul mulku, wa la hul Hamd, wa Huwa ala kulli shaiy'in Qadeer* (There is no god but Allah alone, who has no partner. His is the dominion and His is the praise, and He is able to do all things),
- *Alif Lām Mīm Allāhū lā ilaha illa-hu al-ḥayy al-qayyūm* (Allah, there is no god but He, the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsisting and the Sustainer),
- *lā ilaha illa-hu ar-rahman ar-rahīm* (There is no god but He, the Most Gracious, the Bestower of Grace, the Universally Merciful, the Singularly Compassionate),
- *Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahīm* (In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate), and
- *'Innā li-llāhi wa 'innā 'ilay-hi rāji'ūn* (Indeed we belong to Allah and to Him do we return).

Some Sufi orders place special emphasis on *dhikr* of the breath. In one such breath practice, the Sufi exhales while saying silently or out loud “*lā ilaha*” through the left nostril, concentrating on cleansing everything that is other-than-Allah and visualizing that leaving through the little toe on the left foot, and inhales through the right nostril while saying “*illa-llāh*,” concentrating on being filled by the light of Allah like a sun rising from the right of the heart and third eye and saturating the whole being. Usually one starts with this *dhikr* of the breath lying down with the head toward the *Kaaba* and then practices incorporating it into daily life. Another *dhikr* of the breath is to inhale while repeating “Allah” and exhale while saying “*Hū*” (He). Sufis also spend time looking at the Name with the intention to be the seer, the seen and the seeing – to open the door to being a witness between the Manifest Existence of the One God and annihilation of the self. This practice is often followed by closing the eyes and continuing to visualize the Name. Shaykh Al-Jamal al-Rifa’i prescribed the practice of looking at the Name Allah for the last two hours of all-night *khalwas* (spiritual retreat).

Sufis also hold group sessions of remembrance (*majālis adh-dhikr*) to chant as a group. These sessions often include repetition of Allah, Divine Names, such as *Ya Ḥayy Ya Qayyūm* (the Living, the Self-subsisting), *Ya Latīf* (the Subtle) and “*lā ilaha illa-llāh*,” as well as sharing the Sufi order’s teachings. Islamic mystics find reason for holding these session in the teachings of previous mystics, like those of Ibn al-‘Arabī, who wrote, “The Exalted Lord has said: *Remember Me, and I will remember you*. Thus if the servant remembers (invokes) God in himself, God will remember him in Himself, and if the servant remembers his Lord in a gathering, God will remember him in a better gathering.”³¹⁰ Sufis also point to *ḥadīth*, such as this one narrated by ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Amr and quoted by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal to emphasize the

³¹⁰ Chourief, 175.

importance of these gatherings: “I asked the Prophet, ‘O Messenger of God, what is the recompense for the sessions of invocation?’ He said, ‘The recompense for the sessions of invocation is Paradise.’”³¹¹

Recitation of the Qur’ān is also considered a primary form of *dhikr*. Some Sufi orders prescribe the recitation of certain chapter(s) every morning and evening, as well as getting up some portion of the night for its recitation. Further, many Muslims and Sufi recite portions of the Qur’ān, like the opening chapter, *Sūratu-l-Fātiḥah*, for specific person(s) or situations. They may repeat the Qur’ānic phrase *Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahīm* (In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate) with daily activities. Other forms of *dhikr* through recitation include the litanies associated with a particular order, such as the *Ḥizbu-l-Baḥr*, an orison received in a dream by ‘Alī Abū l-Hasan ash-Shādhilī (1196-1258), founder of the Shadhiliyya Sufi order, or the *Al-Wird ash-Shādhilī*, a litany prescribed by him for every morning and evening. Shaykh Al-Jamal Al-Rifa’i encouraged his students to recite the *Waḍḥīfatu-ṣ-Ṣalātu-l-Mashīshīyyah*, which was one of the daily spiritual exercises of the Sufi saint ‘Abd al-Salām ibn Mashīsh (1140 – 1227).

Many Muslims take this *ḥadīth*, “An Angel came unto me and said: ‘God said: None of thy people invoceth blessing upon thee but I invoke blessings upon him tenfold,’”³¹² as instruction to engage in *salawat*, i.e., sending blessings and peace upon the Prophet, as a form of *dhikr*. This practice can be done in a variety of ways, such as by chanting a phrase like ‘blessings and peace be upon him’ or reciting litanies. Followers of the *Mawlawī* Sufi order engage in sacred dance – whirling in which the dancer begins with her arms crossed over her chest clasping her shoulders and then begins turning with the right hand raised upward in a symbol of receiving

³¹¹ Chourief, 157.

³¹² Lings, 43.

the Divine outpouring and the left hand downward as a transmission of the Divine outpouring into the world and earth. As Sufi masters have espoused the value of following a spiritual guide, such as in this quote from Rūmī - “whoever flees from a master in this world flees from good fortune. Know this!”³¹³ – many Sufis view the practices associated with following a spiritual guide as a form of *dhikr*. These practices include visiting the spiritual guide, studying with her or him, copying (handwriting) her or his teachings, striving to follow those teachings and their example, etc. Many Muslims and Sufis also engage in *Baraka Islam*, which refers to visiting the tomb of a saint or prophet to receive *baraka* (blessing). Per religious scholar Michael Sells, this practice was present in the time of the Sufi shaykh Abū Naṣr as-Sarrāj (who died in 988 AD), and that according to Sarrāj, the custom “went back all the way to the time of Bistami [Abū Yazīd al-Bistamī (804 AD – 874 AD)].”³¹⁴

Of course, observation of the other pillars of Islam (going on pilgrimage, giving charity, and fasting) constitutes *dhikr*. Numerous *ayats* (verses from the Qur’ān) and *ḥadīth*, such as the following, convey the importance of justice in Islam: “the Holy Prophet of Islam said: ‘A moment of justice is better than seventy years of worship in which you keep fasts and pass the nights in offering prayers and worship to Allah.’ (Jami’us Sa’adat, vol. II, p. 223); and “the Holy Prophet further said: ‘The deed of justice performed by a leader for one day for his people is better than the deeds of the man who spends fifty or hundred years amongst his family members in the worship of Allah.’”³¹⁵ Accordingly, taking part in social justice actions can also be considered a form of *dhikr*. In addition, Shaykh Al-Jamal Al-Rifa’i taught his students several methods of spiritual healing through recitation of Qur’ānic ayats and Divine Names, which are

³¹³ Chittick, 121.

³¹⁴ Sells, 227.

³¹⁵ Muhsin Qara’ati, “Social Justice,” *Lessons from Qur’an* [book online] (Islamic Seminary Publications) <https://www.al-islam.org/lessons-quran-muhsin-qaraati/social-justice> [accessed October 9, 2019].

other forms of remembrance of God. Also, *dhikr* may take the form of an ‘improvised’ practice, such as Imam Jamal Rahman’s touching his heart each time he is aware of being thankful.

Rather than try to address the spiritual capacities of each of the many forms of *dhikr*, I will simply highlight a few. In the form of *dhikr* that is highly encouraged in my Sufi order – repetition of the Unifying Name (Allah) – *attention* to repeating the word Allah is the core activity of the practice in an outer sense. This *attention* requires a focus on the word Allah as an outer means for an inner opening to be in the presence of God (*intention*), which also involves *imagination* as the practitioners visualize the name written in Arabic in front of them or in their heart. This practice also involves the capacity for *meaning-making* as related by Shaykh Al-Jamal al-Rifai:

This remembering is necessary for him to become complete. When he is complete, he remembers himself and no other. Because he has become one with the name, when he remembers the name of God, he also remembers himself. He is the mirror of God, for Him to see Himself reflected. Each remembrance cleans this mirror to reflect only the qualities of God.... All is one when he remembers the name.... There is nothing and no one, only He.... When the remembrance becomes complete in your being, you will see only one picture and know there is nothing, only He.³¹⁶

With repetition of Allah, as with repetition of the Divine Names of God, like *Ash-Shāfi* (The One Who Heals), and with repetition of the names associated with the stages of spiritual development (*nafs al-ammara*, the commanding self; *nafs al-lawamma*, the blaming self; etc.), the capacity of *meaning-making* includes the concept of change, of purification, of healing, of growth, of spiritual transformation. Similarly, the *intention* to realize a high degree of spiritual transformation is associated with remembering the name of God in accordance with this *ḥadīth*: “those who are given the highest spiritual degree are those who practice the invocation of God” (narrated by Abū a-Dardā’, quoted by al-Bayhaqī).³¹⁷

³¹⁶ Shaykh Muḥammad al-Jamal al-Rifa’i as-Shadhuli, *Music of the Soul* (Canada: Sidi Muḥammad Press, 2002), 25.

³¹⁷ Tayeb Chourief, *Spiritual Teachings of the Prophet* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 130.

Remembering the name of God may also involve the capacity for *feelings*: “You can feel happiness and peace and you can touch Him in your hand.”³¹⁸ Multiple *ayats* relate the spiritual benefits of remembrance, including *feelings* of peace and happiness, such as “Surely – in remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest” (Qur’ān 13:28), and “And when the prayer is ended, disperse freely on earth and seek to obtain [something] of God’s bounty; but remember God often, so that you might attain to a happy state!” (Qur’ān 62:10). As with the ritual prayer and the ritual cleaning, obedience to God as an *intention* is associated with remembering the name in accordance with Qur’ān 33:41: “O you who have attained to faith! Remember God with unceasing remembrance.” The *intention* to follow a directive for which the reward is paradise is also associated with remembering the name in accordance with the aforementioned *ḥadīth* regarding the “sessions of invocation” and other similar *ḥadīths*. The same intention holds true in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s reference to this *ḥadīth qudsi*: “The Exalted Lord has said: *Remember Me, and I will remember you*. Thus if the servant remembers (invokes) God in himself, God will remember him in Himself, and if the servant remembers his Lord in a gathering, God will remember him in a better gathering.”³¹⁹ Islamic scholar Martin Lings offers a similar statement regarding the merits of *dhikr*: “remembrance of God is greater (than the ritual prayer), and ... turning toward the inner Centre is ‘greater’ than turning toward the outer centre.”³²⁰

I would be remiss to not point out that congregational worship as well as less formal practices, like listening to sermons on YouTube and singing songs by Sami Yusuf (“Islam’s Biggest Rockstar” according to *Time Magazine*), are equally valid forms of *dhikr*. From my perspective, remembrance of God is not meant to represent a particular belief system or a

³¹⁸ Jamal, 25.

³¹⁹ Chourief, 175.

³²⁰ Lings, 37.

particular school of jurisprudence within that system; accordingly, *dhikr* can take many outer forms, both formal and informal, while its essence remains an individual experience of connection with the Divine. Even though conservative Muslims will certainly disagree with this view, my perspective is that the outer form of *dhikr* is less important than the result; if an action is performed for the purpose of helping a person remember God and it does so, then it seems like a valid form of *dhikr* to me. This inner sameness within the variety of outer forms is alluded to in Barbara Bradley Hagerty's conclusion about brain scans: "a mystical state is a mystical state. The closer one draws to a transcendent state ... the more the descriptions merge. Christian mystics sound like Sufi mystics, who sound like Jewish mystics, who sound like Buddhists."³²¹ While *dhikr* does not guarantee that practitioners will experience mystical states, it does lay the groundwork for a restructuring of their heart, mind, body and soul.

The Spiritual Practices of Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī

In his commentary on *The Munqidh* (one of Al-Ghazālī's books with multiple manuscripts and titles, including *What Saves from Error and Unites with the Possessor of Power and Glory*), Islamic scholar Reverend R.J. McCarthy writes that "certainly the royal way to draw fruit from Sufism is actually the way of practice, that precisely which conduces to 'taste it' through the typical form of apprehension which Ghazālī calls *dhawq* [taste, geusis (sense of taste), direct experience]."³²² We can identify Al-Ghazālī's means of 'tasting,' i.e., the spiritual practices he used and valued, from both what Al-Ghazālī has written himself and what others

³²¹ Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Fingerprints of God: What Science is Learning About the Brain and Spiritual Experience* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 175.

³²² Vincenzo M. Poggi, *Un Classico della Spiritualità Musulmana* (Rome: Libreria dell' Università Gregoriana, 1967) [Chapter 8, Paragraph 98], quoted in R. J. McCarthy, "Introduction," in *Deliverance from Error: Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, trans. R. J. McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 31.

have written about him. We know that he left a prestigious position, after which he “followed the path of asceticism.”³²³ We also know that after leaving his career, he performed *hajj* (the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, the home of the *Kaaba*, the holiest shrine in Islam). We also know that he practiced *Baraka Islam* when he traveled, visiting “the venerated religious shrines.”³²⁴ After his pilgrimage and travels, Al-Ghazālī was reported to have returned home and been “preoccupied with meditation,”³²⁵ by which we can infer that he engaged in *taffakkur* and *dhikr*. He said of himself that he sought “to practice *dhikr* [remembrance of God; or the practice so designated] continuously.”³²⁶ We know that after he left his career he practiced some degree of seclusion for ten years. Al-Ghazālī tied his seeking seclusion to his striving in *jihad*:

My only occupation was seclusion and solitude and spiritual exercise and combat with a view to devoting myself to the purification of my soul and the cultivation of virtues and cleansing my heart for the remembrance of God Most High.... I used to pray in seclusion for a time in the Mosque, mounting to its minaret for the whole day and shutting myself in. Then I travelled from Damascus to Jerusalem, where I would go daily into the Dome of the Rock and shut myself in. Then I was inwardly moved by an urge to perform the duty of the pilgrimage and to draw succor from the blessings of Mecca and Medina and the visit to the tomb of the Apostle of God—God’s blessing and peace be upon him!”³²⁷

For Ghazālī, God gives the gift of knowledge to the human who undertakes *jihad*, thereby preparing to receive knowledge and proximity to God; this preparation includes “discipline in morality, mortification, renunciation of the destructive qualities of this world completely,

³²³ ‘Abd al-Ghāfir al-Fārisī, *Life of Ghazālī*, trans. R.J. McCarthy, quoted in R. J. McCarthy, “Introduction,” in *Deliverance from Error: Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*. trans. R. J. McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 15.

³²⁴ McCarthy, 15.

³²⁵ ‘Abd al-Ghāfir al-Fārisī, *Life of Ghazālī*, trans. R.J. McCarthy, quoted in R. J. McCarthy, “Introduction,” in *Deliverance from Error: Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*. trans. R. J. McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 16.

³²⁶ ‘Abd al-Ghāfir al-Fārisī, *Life of Ghazālī*, trans. R.J. McCarthy, quoted in R. J. McCarthy, “Introduction,” in *Deliverance from Error: Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*. trans. R. J. McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 17.

³²⁷ Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Deliverance from Error: Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, trans. R. J. McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 80-81.

running away from preoccupation with human beings, becoming devoted in the love of the Creator and seeking the One.”³²⁸

In his biography of Al-Ghazālī, ‘Abd al-Ghaffīr reports that after the travel and studies that followed leaving his career, Al-Ghazālī returned home and “apportioned his time to ... recital of the Qur’an and keeping company with the men of hearts.”³²⁹ This report coincides with the component of ascetism regarding one’s companions. In his discussion of with whom to interact, Ghazālī cites the following *ḥadīth*: “The Messenger of Allah, blessings and peace be upon him, said, ‘A person’s religious life is only as good as that of his friend, so let each one of you consider well whom he befriends’ (*Timirdhī*) 2378).”³³⁰ It also coincides with Al-Ghazālī’s *Jewels of the Qur’ān*, in which Ghazālī states that the seeker “should exert much effort and seek the help of those who are well-versed in the religious knowledge” in striving to understand the “deep meanings of the Quran.”³³¹ In this book, Ghazālī explains and categorizes the principles of the Qur’ān, lists 763 “signs that refer to the divine Essence, the divine names and qualities and divine acts,” and notes 741 “signs that describe the straight path and signs that encourage the human being to follow the straight path,”³³² providing clear evidence that Qur’ānic recitation and study was clearly a foundation of his spirituality and a primary means of his ‘tasting.’

In the introduction to his work *The Beginning of Guidance*, Ghazālī writes, “Actions speak louder than words and human nature is such that it is inclined more to take part in what is done than to obey what is said.”³³³ He advocates managing one’s time very closely, advising his

³²⁸ Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazzali Jewels of the Quran (Jawāhir al-Qur’ān)*, ed. Laleh Bakhtiar (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 2009), 42.

³²⁹ ‘Abd al-Ghaffīr al-Fārisī, *Life of Ghazālī*, trans. R.J. McCarthy, quoted in R. J. McCarthy, “Introduction,” in *Deliverance from Error: Five Key Texts Including His Spiritual Autobiography al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*. trans. R. J. McCarthy (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), 18.

³³⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, 134.

³³¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Jewels of the Quran*, 43.

³³² Al-Ghazālī, *Jewels of the Quran*, 9.

³³³ Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, 22.

pupils to “manage your time and organize your routine of worship from morning to night.”³³⁴ In this instruction manual-like text, he provides very specific directives on daily life – the etiquette of sleeping; when to wake; what to say when you wake; your intention for dressing; which foot to enter the bathroom with; what to say upon entering; details regarding the preparation, process, and cleaning of oneself for urination and defecation; what to say while cleaning oneself; how to perform ablution; what foot to leave the bathroom with; what to say upon leaving; and so on. In Part I of this work Ghazālī details how one should leave for the mosque to pray the morning prayer; what one should do first, along the way, once there, and upon completion of the prayer until sunrise. He stipulates how one should spend the time until midday (“1. Seeking Useful Knowledge,” “2. Worship,” “3. Good Works,” “4. Earning a Living and Protecting Your Religion”)³³⁵ as well as the etiquette of preparing for prayer, leading prayer, following in prayer, fasting, etc. As evidenced by his advice for the time between the noon and afternoon prayers – “do not occupy yourself with anything other than learning [useful] knowledge, helping a Muslim, reciting the Qur’an, or striving to earn your living by which you support your religious life”³³⁶ – we see further evidence that recitation of the Qur’an was a primary practice for Ghazālī. Also in Part I, Ghazālī directs his students to *taffakkur* in the form of contemplation of death, saying, “Preparation for it is superior to preparation for this worldly life, since you know that you will not stay in it for more than a short period of time. Perhaps all you have left of life is one breath, one hour, or one day. So consider this in your heart each day, and make your self be patient with obedience to Allah Most High a day at a time.”³³⁷

³³⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, 26.

³³⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, 52-58.

³³⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, 60.

³³⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, 66-68.

In Part II of *The Beginning of Guidance*, Ghazālī addresses the practice of vigilance in the form of ‘guarding’ one’s body. He writes,

know that this religion is made up of two parts: one of them is refraining from disobedience, and the other is the performance of acts of obedience. The first part is more important and more serious. Everyone has the capacity to carry out acts of obedience, but only the truly sincere can abandon their appetites and desires. Thus did the Messenger of Allah, blessings and peace be upon him, say: ‘The [true] emigrant is the one who abandons evil, and the [true] warrior is the one who fights his passions’ (*Mustadrak*).³³⁸

Ghazālī expounds on what vigilance means in relation to protecting one’s eyes, ears, tongue, privates, hands, feet, and heart, though, in relation to the latter, he stipulates that knowledge of the heart and the practice of guarding and caring for it are elucidated more fully in the third and fourth volumes of the *Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihya Ulum al-Din)*. This work is highly regarded and is considered by many scholars to be his greatest work. It includes four volumes: Volume 1 - Acts of Worship, Volume 2 - Book of Worldly Usages, Volume 3 - Book of Destructive Evils, and Volume 4 - Book of Constructive Virtues. *The Beginning of Guidance* is aptly titled as Ghazālī sees it as a beginning; in speaking of it, he says, “If you have tested yourself regarding it, and your self has complied, then continue on to the *Revival of the Religious Sciences* to learn the method for attaining the inner aspect of consciousness of Allah.”³³⁹ In it Ghazālī offers *al-munjiyat* (the savers/deliverers), i.e., what he considers to be means of deliverance from hell, foremost of which is repentance. *Al-munjiyat* also include being thankful, being fearful of being distant from God, being fearful of displeasing God, being hopeful about God, having love for God, trusting in God’s love and mercy, being free from attachment to wealth, practicing asceticism, yearning for God, being content with God’s will, and developing friendship in God. The means of deliverance also include sound intention, which

³³⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, 90.

³³⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, 124.

includes sincerity, truthfulness, *muraqaba* (meditation, including meditation on the Day of Judgement and the afterlife), and *muhasaba* (self-interrogation). Of these savers/deliverers, Ghazālī emphasizes that love of God is “the highest of all the stages of spirituality.”³⁴⁰

Also in *The Beginning of Guidance*, Ghazālī emphasizes the importance of *intention*:

If you try the routine of litanies and worship for some time and your self does not find it burdensome or become negligent of it, but rather your yearning for attaining beneficial knowledge becomes apparent and you want it only for the sake of Allah Most High and the abode of the afterlife, then seeking this knowledge is better than other voluntary works, as long as the intention is sound. The matter hinges on the soundness of intention. For if it is not sound, it is the source of the deception of the ignorant, and the place where men’s feet slip.³⁴¹

Similarly of great importance to Ghazālī was being polite with God; he describes polite conduct as follows:

keeping the eyes downcast; full concentration; remaining silent; stillness of the limbs; hastening to fulfill His command; avoiding prohibited things; minimal objection to what He decrees for you; constant remembrance of Him; persevering in contemplation; giving preference to the Truth [i.e., Allah, but turning to Him over all else]; despairing of created beings; humility with extreme reverence [before Allah’s Majesty]; a feeling of brokenness, coupled with modesty; peace of mind, without [resorting to] any strategy for earning livelihood, by having confidence in the guarantee [of Allah]; and complete trust in the grace of Allah, Mighty and Majestic, knowing with certainty that the best choice will always be the one He makes.³⁴²

Overview of Christian Spiritual Formation Practices

Just as my overview of Islamic spiritual practices is informed by being a student of Shadhiliyya Sufism and a Muslim who strives to follow the Shafī’i school of Sunni jurisprudence, so also is my attempt to provide an overview of Christian spiritual formation practices. Because I am not a practicing Christian, I cannot provide an overview of Christian spirituality as an expert. Instead, I can point toward commonalities between my experience on

³⁴⁰ Saritoprak, 111.

³⁴¹ Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, 54.

³⁴² Al-Ghazālī, *The Beginning of Guidance*, 128-130.

the path of Islamic Sufism with what I have learned about others' experience of Christian spirituality, and I can direct us to places where something in Christian spirituality resonates with my own. I will stick to the practices for which my exposure has been sufficient to identify commonalities with Islamic spiritual formation practices. I will not attempt to be so comprehensive as to address those Christian spiritual formation practices for which I have only awareness and insufficient exposure to identify commonalities. Similarly, I will not attempt to delineate the differences between protestant, orthodox, catholic, restoration, or other denominations' spiritual formation practices.

An overview of Christian spiritual formation practices by a practicing Muslim is sure to highlight both similarities to and differences from Islamic practices. To some degree, we find similarity in the efforts of Christians to imitate Christ and the efforts of Muslims to imitate Muḥammad. As a side note – I am in no way equating Jesus and Muḥammad. While Muslims revere Jesus, the Muslim view of Jesus is more in line with the view of the Ebionites than with the interpretation presented by Paul, although Muslims believe in Jesus's virgin birth while Ebionites did not. (Ebionites were Jewish Christians who believed Jesus was a human Messiah. The Ebionites had their own Gospel in Aramaic and followed what they believed to be the direct teachings of the disciples and the Jerusalem Church as led by James the Just, the brother of Jesus.) In Islam, Jesus is known as the word of God; in Islam, Muḥammad is known as God's last Prophet in his physical form; in Islamic mysticism, Muḥammad is also known to be, in his spiritual form, the pre-eternal essence and light that lies within every person. All of which is to say that a comparison of the Qur'ān and Jesus, and of Muḥammad and the Holy Spirit may be more appropriate than of Jesus and Muḥammad, although the nuances of these respective conceptions make comparisons of this sort problematic.

We find similarity between the Islamic practices of reciting Qur’ān (as well as other forms of Qur’ān reading, exegesis, and study) and performing the five daily ritual prayers with the Anglican practices of scripture reading (as well as other forms of biblical reading, exegesis, and study) and following *The Book of Common Prayer*. In addition, like the Muslim ritual prayer, the Roman Catholic ‘Prayer of the Hours’ (also called the Divine Office or the Daily Office) calls for a “structured way of praying together at certain times each day.”³⁴³ Both traditions emphasize the importance of both communal prayer and personal prayer.

We also find similarity and dissimilarity between Qur’ān recitation, in which the worshipper recites sacred text exclusively without a melody, and Christian chant, in which the worshipper sings “a Latin text ... in unison to a single melody.”³⁴⁴ They are alike in their focus on sacred text, although not all Christian chanting is of sacred text, while dissimilar in their relation to music. Qur’ānic recitation involves reading the Qur’ān following rules of pronunciation and is not associated with melodies or music; Christian chant is sung following rules associated with musical conventions.

Christian chant has been a part of Christian worship since the early years of the Christian faith. By the end of the fifth century, the leadership of the Catholic church had “devised a system whereby every biblical psalm (150 in all) was read in church over the course of a week.”³⁴⁵ After this practice was stipulated in the Rule of Benedict in the sixth century, “a cycle of chanted or sung psalms and canticles ... became the norm in the church.”³⁴⁶ Chanting may be of psalms, hymns, antiphons, sequences, tracts, canticles, hymns, responsories, and other passages of

³⁴³ Gabriel O’Donnell, “Praying the Office: Time Stolen for God,” in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 288.

³⁴⁴ Tim Dowley, and Sugu J. M. Chandy, *Christian Music: A Global History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 50.

³⁴⁵ Dowley and Chandy, 52.

³⁴⁶ Dowley and Chandy, 52.

scripture, and it may vary in terms of being monophonic (single-voiced) or polyphonic, with or without rhythm, instruments, harmony, or accents. Over the centuries, Christian chant has taken many forms, including Byzantine, Old Roman, Ambrosian, Beneventan, Gallican, Celtic, Mozarabic, and Gregorian.³⁴⁷ Of these, the forms that have survived are Ambrosian chant and Gregorian chant, the latter of which became the “centralized, uniform liturgical practice authorized and controlled by Rome.”³⁴⁸

Gregorian chant, also known as Roman chant, has “a single, unaccompanied melodic line,” and its texts are “mostly from the Bible, and mostly in Latin (although there are some Greek texts such as *Kyrie eleison* and *Hagios Theos* [‘Holy God’]).”³⁴⁹ It is used in conjunction with mass, the canonical hours, or divine office. Per composer Andrew Wilson-Dickson, “Almost all Gregorian chant, no matter how involved or decorated, has its origins in one of three types of music: cantillation (prayers, readings, psalms), free composition (antiphons) and new poems set to music (hymns).”³⁵⁰ That said, Gregorian chant’s form and structure vary and have changed over time as has its place in the Roman Catholic Church’s liturgy. In their description of Gregorian chant, historian Tim Dowley and Reverend Sugu J. M. Chandy wrote that “the two great collections of Gregorian music for the mass and divine office contain in total some 3,000 melodies covering every aspect of the church’s worship.”³⁵¹ Of its importance, they wrote that Gregorian chant “formed the basis of the Western church’s liturgy for centuries and, with its

³⁴⁷ Frank K. Flinn, “Chant in Catholicism,” in *Encyclopedia of World Religions: Encyclopedia of Catholicism* 2nd ed., Facts On File, 2016, accessed November 22, 2020, https://dtl.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/fofc/chant_in_catholicism/0?institutionId=8909.

³⁴⁸ Dowley and Chandy, 56.

³⁴⁹ Dowley and Chandy, 57.

³⁵⁰ Andrew Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music: From Gregorian Chant to Black Gospel: An Authoritative Illustrated Guide to All the Major Traditions of Music for Worship*. 1st ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 38.

³⁵¹ Dowley and Chandy, 57.

stress on the importance of the words, held a vital role in teaching and evangelizing the people of medieval Europe.”³⁵² Wilson-Dickson calls Gregorian chant “the richest collection of Christian music in the world”³⁵³ with far-reaching influence that “can still be sensed in Lutheran song.”³⁵⁴ In 1903, Pope Pius X lauded Gregorian chant as follows: “Sacred music must ... possess the qualities which belong to liturgical rites, especially holiness and beauty, from which ... universality, will follow spontaneously.... These qualities are found most perfectly in Gregorian chant.”³⁵⁵ This opinion that was later echoed in Pope Pius XI’s *Apostolic Constitution, Mediator Dei* of 1947.³⁵⁶ While the prevalence of Gregorian chant has fluctuated over the centuries, a resurgence occurred in the late twentieth century, even to the extent of popularized recordings; accordingly, it may be the most significant form of modern-day Christian chant.

As for the spiritual significance Christians attribute to chanting and the religious concepts that underly those attributions, Wilson-Dickson describes Christian chant as “the most perfect and satisfying symbol for the unity of Christian believers.”³⁵⁷ Per Dowley and Chandy, chant composer Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) believed that through “singing and playing music ... Christians integrate mind, heart, and body, heal discord, and celebrate heavenly harmony in the *opus Dei* – the service of God. Hildegard theorized that music represents the symphony of angels praising God, the balanced proportions of the revolving celestial sphere, the weaving together of body and soul, and the concealed designs of nature.... Hildegard regarded music as a means of recapturing the beauty of Paradise.”³⁵⁸

³⁵² Dowley and Chandy, 58.

³⁵³ Wilson-Dickson, 32.

³⁵⁴ Wilson-Dickson, 66.

³⁵⁵ Pope Pius X, “*Motu Proprio* of Pope St. Pius X on Sacred Music,” American Catholic Press, accessed January 5, 2021, <https://www.americancatholicpress.org/articlesMotuProprio.html>.

³⁵⁶ Wilson-Dickson, 223.

³⁵⁷ Wilson-Dickson, 49.

³⁵⁸ Dowley and Chandy, 63.

Both the Islamic and Christian traditions place value on pilgrimage as a spiritual practice. We also find connection between Islamic and Christian spiritual formation practices in asceticism. For the roots of Christian monasticism, many scholars point to the Desert Fathers, who “withdrew from ordinary society and sought the solitude of the desert.”³⁵⁹ While we do not find the equivalent of Christian monasticism in Islam, there are elements of Christian monasticism that include common practices. For example, the Desert Fathers also practiced fasting, charity, reduced sleep, and periods of retreat, including periods of silence. Further, they were known to have “placed themselves under spiritual fathers” and to spend their daily lives devoted to prayer.³⁶⁰ According to theologian and historian Sister Benedicta Ward, the *action* of the Desert Fathers prayer was “to say the Psalms, one after another, during the week, and to intersperse this with weaving ropes, sometimes saying, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me.’”³⁶¹ The *intention* was “*hesychia*, quiet, the calm through the whole man that is like a still pool of water, capable of reflecting the sun. To be in true relationship with God, standing before him in every situation – that was the angelic life, the spiritual life, the monastic life, the aim and the way of the monk.”³⁶² This way of uninterrupted prayer is also known as *hesychasm* and is associated with the Jesus prayer, repeating the words “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have compassion on me.”³⁶³ Per Dreitcer, repeating these words is to be done “while standing, kneeling, or making prostrations,” via “mouth[ing] the words or speak[ing] them aloud,” making the practice a prayer of the body.³⁶⁴ The practice relies on the capacity for *attention*, as the practitioner focuses on the words and their meaning. This focus evolves into a prayer of both the

³⁵⁹ Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 1984), xxiii.

³⁶⁰ Ward, xxiii.

³⁶¹ Ward, xxvi.

³⁶² Ward, xxvi.

³⁶³ Dreitcer, *Living Compassion*, 79.

³⁶⁴ Dreitcer, *Living Compassion*, 80.

mind and the heart as the mind and heart join to offer the prayer until it becomes unceasing. The result involves the capacity for *relationality* as the prayer brings “a deep experience of feeling God’s compassionate presence” and a “profound intimacy with God, rather than simply knowing about God.”³⁶⁵

The Desert Fathers efforts to pray without ceasing took the form of using the following phrase from Psalm 70:1 as a mantra: “Be pleased, O God, to deliver me. O Lord, make haste to help me!”³⁶⁶ As with other mantra practices, this one requires the capacity for *attention*, focusing on the words of the mantra and their meaning. Dreitcer relates that this way of praying “expressed 1) faith that God was present; 2) trust that the pray-er would not be abandoned to wild animals and destructive inner voices; 3) the humility of knowing human limitations; 4) intense desire for intimate connection with God; and 5) awe and adoration in the face of God’s all-compassionate immensity;” from which we see that this prayer involves the capacities for *intention* (ranging from personal safety to a sense of connection to God), *feelings* (humility, desire, awe, adoration), *relationality* (intimacy with God), and *meaning-making* (God’s presence and protection).

The practice of *Lectio Divina* is a form of reading scripture (or of any “scriptural books”³⁶⁷ in less traditional forms). Per theologian Reverend Gabriel O’Donnell, the *action* of *lectio* is the practitioner “mumbling the phrase” while employing the capacity for *attention* by “ponder[ing] it, rest[ing] in it.”³⁶⁸ Its *intention* involves *relationality* as the practitioner strives to listen to the personal message God has for the practitioner in the text being repeated, and thereby

³⁶⁵ Dreitcer, *Living Compassion*, 81.

³⁶⁶ Dreitcer, *Living Compassion*, 57, paraphrasing John Cassian, “Conference 10. The Second Conference of Abbot Isaac. On Prayer,” newadvent.org, accessed September 4, 2020, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/350810.htm>.

³⁶⁷ Gabriel O’Donnell, “Reading for Holiness: *Lectio Divina*” in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 46.

³⁶⁸ O’Donnell, 47.

“to come to know God.”³⁶⁹ The practice involves *release* of distracting thoughts as well as *release* of personal agenda as a “form of surrender, of letting go.”³⁷⁰ It may also involve the use of *imagination*, as in the example provided by O’Donnell in which the practitioner repeats “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” and imagines “a shepherd leading his sheep into lush and peaceful pastures.”³⁷¹

Martin Luther felt strongly about praying with the catechism. Christian education professor Robin Maas summarizes Luther’s instructions to a friend to begin morning prayer with recitation of “either the Creed or the Decalogue word for word and from beginning to end. (The one praying should either kneel or stand with hands folded and eyes directed ‘heavenward.’)”³⁷² The *actions* of the prayer continue with recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, allowing for reflection after each petition. This practice relies on the capacity for *attention* as the person praying is to “think deeply about the *meaning* [emphasis added]” of each petition.³⁷³ For Luther, prayer called for “concentration and singleness of heart.”³⁷⁴ Luther also offered instruction on how to pray the Decalogue and the Creed with a four-part approach to reflection after each repetition; this reflection included instruction, thanksgiving, confession, and prayer. This approach was meant to be a guide rather than a rigid protocol. Luther strongly advocated the daily recitation of the catechism, especially for ministers, saying of himself, “Every morning, and whenever else I have time, I read and recite word for word the Lord’s prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the Catechism daily, yet I cannot master it as I wish, but

³⁶⁹ O’Donnell, 47.

³⁷⁰ O’Donnell, 49.

³⁷¹ O’Donnell, 48.

³⁷² Robin Maas, “A Simple Way to Pray: Luther’s Instructions on the Devotional Use of the Catechism,” in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 163.

³⁷³ Maas, 163.

³⁷⁴ Maas, 163.

must remain a child and pupil of the Catechism, and I do it gladly.”³⁷⁵ Luther’s letter to his friend Peter reveals some of Luther’s *intention* as well as the *meaning* he assigned prayer; Maas relates that these prayers were for him a means of guarding himself, as well as a means “to bring solace, renew fervor, and stop temptation dead in its tracks.”³⁷⁶

St. Ignatius led his students in “the Spiritual Exercises” to discern and put into practice God’s will. The Exercises included Ignatian meditation in which “one mentally places oneself in the presence of God, utilizes a scriptural text or a specific meditative prayer from the Exercises, and begins with the basics of who, what, where, how, and when: *Who* is this speaking to me? *What* does this mean to me? *Where* does this apply to my life? *How* and *when* do I respond?”³⁷⁷ These meditations include meditation on the “the camp of Satan and the camp of Christ,” “the Three Classes of Men,” and “the Three Degrees of Humility.”³⁷⁸ The Exercises include contemplation, such as contemplation on the Incarnation and on Divine Love; “repetition” in which the pray-er reviews or re-prays a previous prayer experience; and examen. The Exercises also include a prayer in which the pray-er kneels before the crucifix asking the Lord, “What have I done for you? What am I doing for you? What ought I to do for you?”³⁷⁹

As Ignatius instructed his students to practice the examen twice a day, it seems to have been a practice of particular significance to him. He suggested that it be done at noon and night, and then recalled upon waking in order to strengthen one’s resolve for the day. The *actions* of the examen include a preparatory prayer to foster openness to the presence of God and two preparatory preludes for the intellect and the will. The first “makes us conscious of what we are

³⁷⁵ Theodore G. Tappert, ed., and trans., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 359, quoted in Maas, 168.

³⁷⁶ Maas, 167.

³⁷⁷ Barbara Bedolla and Dominic Totaro, “Ignatian Spirituality,” in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 175.

³⁷⁸ Bedolla and Totaro, 178-179.

³⁷⁹ Bedolla and Totaro, 177.

doing; that is, it is an examination of conscience” in relation to both “a specific sin or fault” and in relation to “one’s whole demeanor before the Almighty.”³⁸⁰ The second involves the *intention* to open to God’s grace in the examen and for all of the practitioner’s thoughts and actions to “redound to the greater glory of God.”³⁸¹ Further, the *intention* of the examen is to “be aware of God in everything,” in both the moments of “divine presence” as well as moments of “absence” through which the practitioner experiences “the grace of being gifted but also the awareness of brokenness.”³⁸² The *actions* of the examen itself involve reviewing a period of time, like a 24-hour period if it is performed daily, or the morning if it is performed at noon and the afternoon and evening if it is performed again that night. As this process requires a survey of the time period being reviewed, it requires the foundational capacity of *attention*. The examination of conscience involves first remembering all the goodness that the practitioner received during the time period being examined, acknowledging it, and expressing gratitude for it. Second, it involves praying for “the grace ‘to see myself as I am seen’”, in other words, to “put on ‘the mind of Christ’ (Phil. 2:5; I Cor. 2:16).”³⁸³ Third, the practitioner contemplates “whatever alienates us from God, be it person, place or thing.”³⁸⁴ Fourth, the practitioner repents of these things, and fifth, the practitioner resolves to rely on God’s grace, guard oneself for God, and follow divine injunctions.

Teresa of Avila was well-known for her teachings on prayer, as well as her description of the different stages along the spiritual journey. Study of her writings has led to the development

³⁸⁰ John P. McIntyre, “Accountability Before God: The Examen,” in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 192.

³⁸¹ McIntyre, 193.

³⁸² Bedolla and Totaro, 176.

³⁸³ McIntyre, 194.

³⁸⁴ McIntyre, 194.

of a method of prayer, known as “Teresian” even though she “advocated no formal method.”³⁸⁵ In her *The Way of Perfection*, she writes of a prayer she calls the “prayer of quiet” and “recollection” because she found in this form of prayer that “the soul collects its faculties together and enters within itself to be with its God. And its divine Master comes more quickly to teach it and give it the prayer of quiet than He would through any other method it might use.”³⁸⁶ Here we see the importance of the *intention* to be in the presence of God, and of *attention* to what God has to teach the pray-er in the prayer of quiet. Teresa says more about the *interior action* of the prayer, writing that the pray-ers must “disengage [them]selves from everything so as to approach God interiorly.”³⁸⁷ The *intention* for the prayer of quiet relates to *relationality* (deepening relationship with God) and *meaning-making* (preparing oneself to be raised by God “to higher things.”³⁸⁸ Teresa’s writings regarding this prayer invoke the capacity for *imagination* as she offers images, such as the image of a person as a castle with “interior movements ... like crowds of people outside the castle walls” who can either act individually for individual interests or be “gather[ed] inside the castle and focus[ed] together on being with the king and at the service of the king.”³⁸⁹ Likewise, Teresa’s prayer invokes the capacity for *imagination* in focusing on the image of Jesus Christ to support the pray-er’s *attention* to God’s presence.

Just as Sufis engage in remembrance of God using phrases from the Qur’ān and the names for God found in the Qur’ān, monks, priests, and other Christians have developed similar methods of remembering God through repetition of sacred words and phrases. Benedictine monk John Main taught meditation on the Aramaic word *maranatha* (Come, Lord). The *action*

³⁸⁵ Steven Payne, “The Tradition of Prayer in Teresa and John of the Cross,” in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 244.

³⁸⁶ Payne, 245.

³⁸⁷ Payne, 245.

³⁸⁸ Payne, 246.

³⁸⁹ Dreitcer, *Living Compassion*, 60.

associated with this practice is simply to repeat the word *maranatha*. The *attention* associated with the practice is on the repetition of the word. The *intention* is to “keep your entire being focused on Christ.”³⁹⁰ Clinical professor Jill Bormann, who studies the effects of mantram (vocalized) repetition, cites that St. Francis of Assisi used the phrase “My God and my All.” She also offers “Jesus, Jesus,” “Lord Jesus Christ,” “Hail Mary,” or “Ave Maria” as other commonly used phrases for repetition.³⁹¹ Like *dhikr*, these practices rely heavily on the capacities for *attention* and *awareness*.

The Centering Prayer also calls for repetition of a sacred word, though in a different way. Centering Prayer came about through the interaction of Father Thomas Keating with Father William Meninger and the brothers of St. Joseph’s Abbey. The *action* of the practice is as follows:

- Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.
- Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within.
- When engaged with your thoughts, return ever so gently to the sacred word.
- At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.³⁹²

Dreitcer points out that the foundational capacity most active in this practice is *intention*, specifically the intention to “to bring ourselves to God and to be there, open and available.”³⁹³ *Awareness* is required for noticing when you have become distracted from your intention, as is *attention* to the repetition of the sacred word. Centering Prayer also employs our capacity for *meaning-making*; it invites faith, trust, and nonattachment to outcome as it assumes that God “is

³⁹⁰ Dreitcer, *Living Compassion*, 39.

³⁹¹ Jill E. Bormann, “Mantra Repetition: A ‘Portable Contemplative Practice’ for Modern Times,” in *Contemplative Practices in Action: Spirituality, Meditation, and Health*, Thomas G. Plante, ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 82.

³⁹² Thomas Keating, *Manifesting God* (New York: Lantern Books, 2005), 133-136, quoted in Dreitcer, *Living Compassion*, 69.

³⁹³ Dreitcer, *Living Compassion*, 64.

loving us and working for our transformation no matter what we may do or think.”³⁹⁴ Further, Centering Prayer involves *relationality* as it “invites us to surrender to union with Love”³⁹⁵ in “an experience of grounding in an intimate relationship with the Compassion that endlessly flows from God, the Compassionate Presence that *is* God.”³⁹⁶

Christianity also offers an abundance of meditation practices, such as contemporary meditations on God’s will, the creation, service to others, contentment, resisting temptation, and on specific biblical passages, as well as renowned historical meditations, such as the twelve- to fifteenth-century meditations like the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*. The *Meditations on the Life of Christ* are noteworthy for their focus on the spiritual capacity for *imagination*. They called on the practitioner to imagine being in a scene of Jesus’s life as if she were at that time and place. The *Meditations* required *attention* to Jesus’s experience, which will in turn engage our capacity for *feelings* and *relationality*. This vivid imagining engages our emotional reaction to Jesus’s pain, experience of suffering, and his feelings of love, which in turn invites us to loving relationship with both God and our fellow humans, even those with whom we have differences.

As mentioned previously, this overview of Christian spiritual formation practices reflects the practices for which my exposure has been sufficient to identify commonalities with Islamic spiritual formation practices. In some cases, my treatment of a practice is cursory as in my treatment of the historical and contemporary role of liturgy. In other cases, the practices remain completely unaddressed. Those Christian spiritual formation practices that I leave either partially or completely unaddressed, include Confession, Christological devotions, and Marian devotions

³⁹⁴ Keating, *Manifesting God*, 94-95, quoted in Dreitcer, *Living Compassion*, 69.

³⁹⁵ Dreitcer, *Living Compassion*, 69.

³⁹⁶ Dreitcer, *Living Compassion*, 70.

(like praying the rosary) in Roman Catholicism; the various forms of Eucharist/Holy Communion; vigils for someone ill or vigils of mourning; labyrinth walking; singing hymns and the use of music, especially in Black spirituality and Charismatic worship; glossolalia (speaking in tongues), dance and other practices of Pentecostalism; etc. As in the numerous schools of thought in Sunni and Shia Islam, the numerous denominations in Western, Eastern, and Nontrinitarian Christianity make it impossible to address the breadth of extant spiritual formation practices. As with Islamic *dhikr*, I believe the outer forms of the countless Christian practices, while significant, are less important than their effect. As the Desert Father Saint Anthony, Father of All Monks, said, “Whatever you find in your heart to do in following God, that do, and remain within yourself in Him.”³⁹⁷

Convergence between the Spiritual Practices of Thomas Merton and those of Islamic Sufism

Merton’s correspondence, lectures, and personal writing provide a glimpse of the places of connection between Merton’s monastic experience and Sufi spiritual practices. From Merton’s lectures on Sufism, Sorkhabi concluded that Merton found several Sufi practices compelling, especially the remembrance of God (*dhikr*), meditation on God’s Divine Names, witnessing God in nature and in others (“seeing God’s manifestation and mercy in the whole creation and creatures,” and “knowing God through a loving-relation and loving-service.”³⁹⁸ In explaining the Sufi practice of *dhikr* to novices, Merton said, “The disciple concentrates.... He thinks: ‘I want nothing, I love nothing, I seek nothing but God.’ The exhaling breath turns everything out, and then he breathes in love, desire and total concentration on God. The aim is for the whole person

³⁹⁷ Ward, xxvi.

³⁹⁸ Rasoul Sorkhabi, “Thomas Merton’s Encounter with Sufism,” in *Interreligious Insight: A Journal of Dialogue and Engagement* 6, no. 4 (2008): 28.

to be completely centered on God.”³⁹⁹ Merton said of this practice: “this is actually a beautiful way to pray.”⁴⁰⁰ Burton B. Thurston indicates that Merton saw *dhikr* as analogous to the hesychastic prayer of Eastern monks and the Christian Jesus prayer of repeating “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me a sinner.”⁴⁰¹

For Muslims, the practice of *dhikr* is to follow the Qur’ānic injunction (13:28) and prophetic advice to find peace in remembrance of God. Similarly, Thurston points out the similarity of the intention of the Jesus Prayer “to follow the biblical injunction to ‘pray unceasingly’ (1 Thes 5:17). ‘Hesychasm aims at human integration through constant remembrance of God, which can be attained by ‘guarding’ our hearts.’ Thus the Jesus Prayer is called the ‘prayer of the heart.’”⁴⁰² In relation to the Sufi practice of meditation on God’s names, Merton said, “I am stirred to the depths of my heart by the intensity of Moslem piety toward His Names, and the reverence with which He is invoked as the Compassionate and the Merciful.”⁴⁰³ Along the same lines, Merton summarizes his assessment of Islam and of religion in general in one of his lectures as follows: “The basic thing in Islam is that man should come to know Allah by His name, not all His names, but by the name He speaks to us under the names of Allah. This is the basic thing in religion, the total response in one’s heart and to confess He is our creator.”⁴⁰⁴

Merton seemingly found his practice of meditative prayer at least partly analogous to Sufi meditation. In a January 2, 1966, letter explaining his meditation to Abdul Aziz, Merton wrote:

Strictly speaking I have a very simple way of prayer. It is centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love. That is to say that it is centered on faith

³⁹⁹ Burton B. Thurston, “Merton’s Reflections on Sufism,” in *Merton & Sufism: The Untold Story: A Complete Compendium*, ed. Rob Baker and Gray Henry (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005), 37-38.

⁴⁰⁰ Burton Thurston, 37-38.

⁴⁰¹ Burton Thurston, 37-38.

⁴⁰² Gerald O’Collins and Edward G. Farrugia, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1997), 91], quoted in Bonnie Thurston, “Thomas Merton’s Interest in Islam: The Example of Dhikr,” in *Merton & Sufism: The Untold Story: A Complete Compendium*, ed. Rob Baker and Gray Henry (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2005), 46.

⁴⁰³ Sorkhabi, 24.

⁴⁰⁴ Bonnie Thurston, 43.

by which alone we can know the Presence of God. One might say this gives my meditation the character described by the Prophet as “being before God as if you saw Him.” ...it is a matter of adoring Him as invisible and infinitely beyond our comprehension.... There is in my heart this great thirst to recognize totally the nothingness of all that is not God. My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and Silence.... It is not “thinking about” anything, but a direct seeking of the Face of the Invisible, which cannot be found unless we become lost in Him Who is Invisible.⁴⁰⁵

Merton also indicated his appreciation for Sufi prayer retreats, indicating that he engaged in what he described as “solitude retreats in his monastery,” he even used the Sufi term *khalwa* to refer to his retreats.⁴⁰⁶ For Sufis, one of the most important retreats is that of the Islamic ‘Night of Destiny,’ often observed on the 27th of Ramadan. Per Merton’s journal for January 18, 1966, Merton observed the Islamic ‘Night of Destiny.’ The previous year, Merton indicated in his correspondence to Abdul Aziz his desire to participate in Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting; Merton wrote, “I would like to join spiritually with the Moslem world in this act of love, faith and obedience toward Him.”⁴⁰⁷

The central role of various forms of prayer is clear in both Islamic mysticism and Christian mysticism. One of the practices that I am most touched by in the correspondence of Merton and Abdul Aziz is that they prayed for each other; as professor Rasoul Sorkhabi noted, “These men ... remembered each other in their prayers.”⁴⁰⁸ Here too is a place of convergence for Muslims and Christians. Just as Muslims make a habit of asking each other to pray for them, Christians “pray for each other” in accordance with James 5:16.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), 63-64, quoted in Sidney H. Griffith, “Mystics and Sufi Masters: Thomas Merton and Dialogue between Christians and Muslims,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15, no. 3 (July 2004): 311.

⁴⁰⁶ Sorkhabi, 25.

⁴⁰⁷ Sorkhabi, 24.

⁴⁰⁸ Sorkhabi, 23.

⁴⁰⁹ This Bible reference is to the New International Version.

With Islamic and Christian prayer, as with these other Islamic and Christian spiritual formation practices, we see various forms of theistic spirituality. We also see that *relationality*, i.e., deepening one's relationship to God, is the beginning, middle and end of these Islamic and Christian spiritual formation practices. At the same time, each practice is embedded in its own context. Each practice is embedded in its own religious and cultural history, often arising from quite different circumstances, environments, linguistics, etc. Further, each practice is embedded in a conceptualization that impacts the practitioner's experience of that practice. While in a general sense the spiritual practices in this overview are alike in an intention of deepening one's relationship to God, they may differ in their theological underpinnings, such as in a trinitarian versus a nontrinitarian concept of God. Accordingly, importance differences arise both in the ends of these various practices and in different practitioners' experience of the same practices. For example, the end of a practice for one practitioner may be a sense of unity while another's experience of the same practice may be a sense of nothingness or emptiness.

Even so, as with Merton and Abdul Aziz, not only do we benefit from each other's prayers, we benefit from sharing our various forms of devotion, our manner of engaging in those forms, and our experience of doing so. Through deepening our understanding of others' experience of their tradition and associated spiritual formation practices, we can deepen understanding of our own experience in our tradition. Better understanding each other's unique perspectives, history, and experience, both motivates and unites us as it provides moving glimpses into the profound spiritual transformation that occurs through our respective practices.

Chapter 4

Two Sacred Text Spiritual Formation Practices –

Qur’ānic Recitation and *Lectio Divina*

Qur’ānic Recitation as a Spiritual Formation Practice in Islam and Recitation of Surah Ya Sīn in Islamic Sufism

For Muslims, the Holy Qur’ān (the Arabic word *qur’ān* is translated as “the recitation,” “the wisdom reading,” or “revelation”) was revealed to the prophet Muḥammad, who was born in Mecca, Arabia in about 570 CE. When Muḥammad was about forty years old (about 609 or 610 CE), he began to habitually withdraw to a cave to meditate in seclusion. On one such occasion, the angel Gabriel came to him and informed him that he was a messenger prophet and that he had been chosen by God to receive His word. Muslims believe that God, through Gabriel, transmitted revelations of His word to Muḥammad orally as well as “imprint[ing them] upon his heart,”⁴¹⁰ starting with Qur’ān 96:1-5: “Read in the name of thy Sustainer, who has created – created man out of a germ-cell! Read – for thy Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One who has taught [man] the use of the pen – taught man what he did not know!”

Muḥammad, who was illiterate, in turn related these imprinted revelations to his followers orally, and his followers promptly memorized them. These revelations carried a strong message of monotheism to seventh-century Arabia, a time and place of many tribes and kingdoms whose people worshipped varied and multiple gods and goddesses. Muḥammad received these revelations over a period of twenty-two or twenty-three years, until the year of his death (632 CE). In the years following Muḥammad’s death these revelations were written down

⁴¹⁰ Tamara Sonn, “Introducing” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 3.

and compiled to make up the Holy Qur'ān. The third caliph of Islam, 'Uthmān b. 'Affān, commissioned scholars to establish a written Qur'ān based on oral and written records. The result was then widely distributed in the Muslim world. This early version, because of the “various dialects and the lack of vowel markers in early Arabic,” led to “seven slightly variant readings [that] remain acceptable;”⁴¹¹ those variant readings primarily “represented [the] prominent traditions of reading in the five centers of Muslim learning in that period: Mecca, Medina, Damascus, Basra, and Kufa.”⁴¹²

Recitation of the Noble Qur'ān became a fixture of Islamic culture from the time the revelations were received and repeated at the gatherings of early Muslims until today; recitation remains a fixture of gatherings for worship, fellowship, and otherwise. As the foundation of the obligatory ritual prayer and other supererogatory prayers, like those performed when a worshipper wakes up during the night to pray before the time of the morning prayer (*tahhajud*), recitation of the Qur'ān is central to Muslim gatherings for worship. Nowhere is this more evident than in Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, which is known as the ‘month of the Qur'ān.’ Muslims customarily recite 1/30th of the Qur'ān each day of Ramadan or each night in communal evening prayers (*tarawih*).

Many Muslims find recitation of the Qur'ān to be a moving experience, so much so that I have often heard the *khateeb* (person giving the sermon) or the person leading prayers moved to tears when reciting. Islamic scholar Willam A. Graham and co-author Navid Kermani also note this emotional reaction to Qur'ān recitation: “The sound of Qur'ānic recitation can move people to tears, from 'Umar, the powerful second Caliph of Islam, to the average farmer, villager, or

⁴¹¹ Sonn, 6.

⁴¹² Anna M. Gade, “Recitation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 484.

townsman of today, including those who may not be particularly observant or religious in temperament.”⁴¹³ Qur’ānic recitation is also a pervasive part of Islamic culture because of the Muslim belief in its blessing – “the sense of the holiness, or *baraka* (‘blessing’), of the sounded holy text seems to penetrate into every corner of the Islamic world.”⁴¹⁴ For that reason, the Qur’ān is recited at funerals, at holiday services, at marriages, and other celebrations.

Accordingly, its memorization has also become a central facet of Islamic cultures. Per Graham and Kermani, “learning at least some part of the divine word by heart is the single most common early experience shared by most Muslims.”⁴¹⁵ Author and international lecturer Safi Kaskas says the following of the role of the Qur’ān in Islamic culture: “The Prophet has instructed all Muslims to ‘Beautify the Qur’ān with your voice’ – a lesson that still resonates in the hearts of all Muslims. To this day Muslims regard this act as one of the most important sacred rituals. Many Muslims also strive to achieve the coveted position of a Hafiz (one who has memorized the entire Qur’ān by heart) considered an honor for a person in this life and the next life.”⁴¹⁶

The Qur’ān is considered the miracle of Islam. In fact, Muslims consider it the greatest miracle, as noted by religious scholar Christopher Buck: “A nineteenth-century mystic once said that the Qur’ān eclipses all of the miracles of all the previous prophets, for the miracle of the Qur’ān, alone, remains (Shirazi 1950; Lawson 1988).”⁴¹⁷ In other words, unlike all other miracles, such as the parting of the Red Sea, the Qur’ān still exists today. For Muslims, the

⁴¹³ Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qurān: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1999), 3.

⁴¹⁴ William A. Graham and Navid Kermani, “Recitation and aesthetic reception,” in *The Cambridge Companion to The Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 121.

⁴¹⁵ Graham and Kermani, 121.

⁴¹⁶ Safi Kaskas, “Qur’ān: The Book of Revelation,” in *WISEUP: Knowledge Ends Extremism*, ed. Daisy Khan (Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality & Equality, 2017), 104.

⁴¹⁷ Christopher Buck, “Discovering,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 20.

Qur'ān is God's speech, His "eternal, uncreated word. As such, it has been the medium *par excellence* of divine-human encounter for Muslims of all times, places and persuasions. It mediates the presence of God, just as it does his will and blessing."⁴¹⁸ In fact, the Qur'ān itself relates the importance of its religious function in verses such as Qur'ān 17:78-79: "Be constant in [thy] prayer from the time when the sun has passed its zenith till the darkness of night, and [be ever mindful of its] recitation at dawn: for, behold, the recitation [of prayer] at dawn is indeed witnessed [by all that is holy]. And rise from thy sleep and pray during part of the night [as well], as a free offering from thee, and thy Sustainer may well raise thee to a glorious station [in the life to come]." Qur'ān 97:4 also relates its religious import: "The Qur'ān describes *laylat al-qadr* [the night when the first verses of the Qur'ān were revealed] as 'better than a thousand months' (Q97:4)."⁴¹⁹ Islamic scholar Martin Lings describes the importance of the Qur'ān for Sufis, who he describes as Muslims who have chosen the Eternal over the temporal world: "The choice they have deliberately and irrevocably made of the Eternal in preference to the ephemeral is not merely theoretic or mental but so totally sincere that it has shaken them to the depth of their being and set them in motion upon the path. The Qur'ān itself is a crystallization of this choice, for it insists without response on the immense disparity between this lower world and the transcendent world of the Spirit."⁴²⁰

In addition, numerous *ḥadīth*, such as the following, relate the spiritual benefit associated with reciting the Qur'ān:

⁴¹⁸ William A. Graham and Navid Kermani, "Recitation and aesthetic reception" in *The Cambridge Companion to The Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 115.

⁴¹⁹ Sonn, 3.

⁴²⁰ Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 30.

- “Abū Umamah [*radeyallāhu 'anhu*] related that he heard the Prophet [*salla allāhu 'alayhi wa-salām*] say, ‘Keep on reciting the Qur’ān for it will intercede for its readers on the Day of Judgment’ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*;”⁴²¹
- “Abū Dharr [*radeyallāhu 'anhu*] narrated that the Prophet [*salla allāhu 'alayhi wa-salām*] said, ‘Stick to the reading of Qur’ān because it is light (*nūr*) in this life and provision (*rizq*) in the life to come’ *ibn Ḥubān in Ṣaḥīḥah fī Ḥadīth Tawīl*;”⁴²² and
- “Abū Hurayrah [*radeyallāhu 'anhu*] narrated that he heard the Prophet [*salla allāhu 'alayhi wa-salām*] say, ‘Whoever listens to one ‘*āyat* [verse] of the Qur’ān there is written for him a twofold blessing and whoever recites it it shall be light (*nūr*) for him on the Day of Judgment’ *Aḥmad*.”⁴²³

Accordingly, Muslims compose prayers asking for these benefits; for example, Islamic scholar Mawlānā Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī combined two *ḥadīth* to craft this supplication: “O Allah, comfort me in my desolation in the grave. O Allah, have mercy on me by dint of the Great Qur’ān and make it my leader, light, guidance, and mercy. O Allah, make me remember whatever I forget from it. Teach me whatever part of it I do not understand. Endow me with its recitation during the hours of the day and the night. And make it an evidence for me, O Lord of the worlds.”⁴²⁴

Religious scholars Alan Godlas and Jamal J. Elias similarly note that Persian Sufi ‘Alā’ al-Dawla al-Simnānī perceived the power of the Qur’ān as transformative: “According to al-Simnānī one can become transformed into a mirror for divine attributes by contemplating the Qur’ān (Elias

⁴²¹ *Ramadan Readings* (The Shādhidhūlī School, Green Mountain Branch, 2006), 1.

⁴²² *Ramadan Readings*, 1.

⁴²³ *Ramadan Readings*, 2.

⁴²⁴ Mawlānā Ashraf ‘Alī Thānawī, *the Accepted Whispers “Munājāt-e-Maqbūl,”* trans. Khalid Baig (Garden Grove, California: Open Mind Press, 2013), 117-118.

1995: 107-110).”⁴²⁵ This transformative power of the Qur’ān is also found in several verses that refer to its healing effect, such as 17:82: “We bestow from on high through this Qur’ān all that gives health [to the spirit] and is a grace unto those who believe,” as well as 9:14, 10:57, 16:69, 26:80, and 41:44.

A concept that is central to approaching recitation of the Qur’ān is that it carries a transmission, a “heart imprint” that is associated with its sound. For purposes of clarification, the sound of the Qur’ān refers to the sound of its recitation in Arabic. Many Muslims consider it non-translatable, preferring that ‘translations’ be referred to as ‘interpretations’ instead. Religious scholar Michael Sells says the following on this topic: “The complex Qur’ānic sound patterns and the relation of sound to meaning – what we might call the ‘sound vision’ of the Qur’ān – are brought out and cultivated in Qur’ānic recitation. No translation can fully capture this sound vision.”⁴²⁶ For Sells, this mingling of meaning and sound and our emotional response makes the Qur’ān unique: “The Qur’ān shapes sounds into particularly powerful combinations with meaning and feeling to create an effect in which sound and meaning are intertwined.”⁴²⁷ Further, the Qur’ān is structured in such a way that despite its nonlinear nature, its seemingly distinct passages “echo, allude to, or offer variations of one another in a manner that ties them together.”⁴²⁸

My Shadhiliyya Sufi teachers explain that this interweaving of sound, meaning, language, and emotion also involves an unseen element – *nūr*, the Light of God. While this word is used in the Qur’ān in literal ways to refer to light, the light of day and the light of the moon, it is also

⁴²⁵ Alan Godlas, “Sufism,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 355.

⁴²⁶ Sells, 13.

⁴²⁷ Sells, 164.

⁴²⁸ Sells, 201.

used to refer to truth, justice, faith, guidance, beauty, sight or perception, as well as to God's light as the only real, universal, pure, original light. Shaykh Al-Jamal taught that God's first creative manifestation was light from which all the rest of the creation came, a light that continues in an unceasing creation. Light in this sense can refer to God's essence or God's spirit by which he manifested this original light, which Sufis call the Muḥammadan light. For Sufis, this concept is crucial, because it means that recitation of the Qur'ān is not simply about reciting words and understanding their meaning, it is about receiving God's light and striving to rid the heart of all darkness in order to embody this light. It is about annihilation of the lower self in the presence of God and subsistence in God, i.e., after being extinguished in God, the human returns to the created world while the person's essence subsists in the subtle world of God's Oneness. The Sufis engagement with the Qur'ān is informed by their belief in ontological categories: "the *nāsūt* (human plane), *malakūt* (the suprasensible plane), *jabarūt* (the plane of Divine compelling), and *lāhūt* (the plane of Divine unity)."⁴²⁹ Belief in these ontological categories then implies that the Qur'ān conveys levels of meaning that correspond to these levels of reality. These ontological categories, when considered in relation to the stages of spiritual development – *nafs al-ammara* (the commanding self, Qur'ān 12:53), *nafs al-lawamma* (the blaming self, Qur'ān 75:2), *nafs al-mulhamah* (the inspired self, Qur'ān 91:7), *nafs al-muma'innah* (the certain self, Qur'ān 89:27), *nafs al-radiyah* (the content self, Qur'ān 89:28), *nafs al-mardiyah* (the gratified self, Qur'ān 89:28), *nafs al-kamila* (the completed self, Qur'ān 4:55 and 5:54) – imply that what the reciter receives through the recitation corresponds to the state of her spiritual development and her ontological awareness.

⁴²⁹ Godlas, 351.

Another concept to consider in approaching recitation of the Qur'ān is the 'soundness of the heart.' Islamic studies scholar Ingrid Mattson states that "a sound 'heart' is needed to grasp the meaning of revelation."⁴³⁰ This idea echoes Qur'ān 26:89, which references having a heart that is "free of evil" on the Day of Resurrection (*The Tajwīdī Qur'ān* has this phrase translated as "a heart that is whole").⁴³¹ Other verses distinguish between how the Qur'ān is received by different people, such as 41:44: "Unto all who have attained to faith, this [divine writ] is a guidance and a source of health; but as for those who will not believe – in their ears is deafness, and so it remains obscure to them: they are [like people who are] being called from too far away." This idea that the Qur'ān will not be received in the same way by every person is consistent with other passages conveying that the person who heeds God's warning is "only him who is willing to take the reminder to heart, and who stands in awe of the Most Gracious although He is beyond the reach of human perception" (36:11), while those who will not heed God's warning are "enshrouded ... in veils so that they cannot see" (36:9).

The aim of Qur'ānic recitation is first to please God through following the injunction and guidance laid out in Qur'ān 17:78-79. For Kaskas, "the primary objective of the Qur'ān is to understand, reflect, and ponder God's message to humanity."⁴³² For Mattson, recitation is like a re-creation of God's revelation: "In reciting the Qur'ān, the very words of God are reproduced in the throats of the reciters and perceived in the ears and minds of listeners. With each articulation of a Qur'ānic phrase, the believer is recreating speech of a God who is as alive today as he has been forever. This is not a performance of historical speech but a rearticulation of the eternal

⁴³⁰ Mattson, 252.

⁴³¹ A. Nooruddeen Durkee, trans., *The Tajwīdī Qur'ān* (Charlottesville, Virginia: an-Noor Educational Foundation, 1994), 591.

⁴³² Kaskas, 105.

words of the living God.”⁴³³ Moreover, the Qur’ān has instructed humankind that hearts find rest in *dhikr*, remembrance of God. For Islamic and environmental studies scholar Anna M. Gade, “the recitation of the Qur’ān is a prototype for the practice of *dhikr*, a Qur’ānic word for ‘reminder’ and a practice associated with Sufi piety.”⁴³⁴ Sells makes a similar point, stating that “the Qur’ān refers to itself as a reminder to humankind.... The recitation of the Qur’ān and Qur’ānic calligraphy are sensibly embodied forms of reminder.”⁴³⁵

The diversity of branches and schools of Islam lends itself to a variety of approaches to Qur’ānic recitation. In addition, scholars hold differing opinions on the reliability of individual *ḥadīth* and collections of *ḥadīth*. In fact, *ḥadīth* studies is its own branch of Islamic scholarship; as such, it is beyond the scope of our topic here. Even so, many agree on the benefits of reciting specific passages at certain times based on *ḥadīth*, such as reciting *Ayat al-Kursi* (2:255) after each of the five daily ritual prayers, which is associated with entrance into Paradise, or reciting *Sūrah Al-Kahf* (18:1-110) on the day of *Jum’ah* (Friday, the day of the noon services that adult Muslim men are required to attend), which is associated with expiation of sins. Again based on *ḥadīth*, *Sūrah Al-Waqi’a* (Chapter 56) is associated with provision and protection from poverty; *Sūrah Mulk* (Chapter 67) is associated with its intercession on the reciter’s behalf on the Day of Judgment, forgiveness of wrongdoing, peace in the grave, and entrance into Paradise.

Sūrah Yā Sīn (Chapter 36) is refer[red] to as “‘The Heart of the Quran,’ after a well-known *ḥadīth*: ‘Everything has a heart, and the heart of the Quran is *Yā Sīn*. Whosoever recites *Yā Sīn*, God records for him recitation of the Quran ten times for his recitation of it’ (Āl, Q).”⁴³⁶

⁴³³ Ingrid Mattson, *The Story of the Qur’ān: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* 2nd ed. (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 85.

⁴³⁴ Gade, 487.

⁴³⁵ Sells, 40.

⁴³⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, Desert Mountain High School Collection (New York,

Many Sufis recite *Yā Sīn* every morning, a practice that “most likely derives from a saying attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās: ‘Whosoever recites *Yā Sīn* when he awakens is given ease for his day until the evening comes. And whosoever reads it in the midst of the night is given ease for his night until he awakens’ (Q).”⁴³⁷ Other *ḥadīth* convey further benefits, such as forgiveness, associated with recitation of *Yā Sīn*; for this reason it is also “recited at burials, on the approach of death and on the ‘Night of Quittance’ (*laylat al-barā’a*, a kind of Muslim All Souls’ Night [mid-Sha’bān, the eight month of the Islamic lunar calendar]).”⁴³⁸

On the one hand, the editors of *The Study Quran* freely offer a reason for *Sūrah Yā Sīn* being named “the heart of the Qur’ān,” noting that “several scholars maintain that *Yā Sīn* is the heart of the Quran because it addresses its central teachings regarding God, prophethood, and the Hereafter.”⁴³⁹ On the other hand, prominent theologian and mystic Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) refers to the reason as a secret:

One seems to be eager to grasp the meaning of the Prophetic Tradition in which the Prophet said: Chapter 36 is the heart of the Quran. I want you to understand it by yourself and use your own inference as you were informed before in such like matters. I hope you can get the meaning. To use your mind and be active in deducing and understanding by yourself is far better than being instructed by anyone else. I hope too that if you get one secret by yourself, you will be more active in using your mind and thought to deduce more and more. By doing so you will know more about the real essence and meanings of the Quran in addition to what we will provide you with to make it easy for you to deduce much more secrets.⁴⁴⁰

Sūrah Yā Sīn is named after the two letters with which it begins, the letter ي (*Yā*) and س (*Sīn*). Islamic scholar and linguist Muhammad Asad interpreted these two letters as “O thou

NY: HarperOne, 2015), 2418, https://archive.org/details/TheStudyQuran_201708/page/n2417, citing the Tafsir (exegesis) of Qurtubi, who in turn cites the *ḥadīth* collection of al-Darimi.

⁴³⁷ Nasr et al., 2419.

⁴³⁸ Graham and Kermani, 124.

⁴³⁹ Nasr et al., 2420.

⁴⁴⁰ Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazzali Jewels of the Quran (Jawāhir al-Qur’ān)*, ed. Laleh Bakhtiar (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 2009), 59.

human being.”⁴⁴¹ My primary Islamic teacher, Shaykh Al-Jamal, offered this interpretation of these two letters: “O wise human who carries the Divine Message to all the worlds which Allah (*sūbhānahū wa-ta ‘ālā*) created. Allah refers to our master, the perfect man (*al- ‘insān al-kāmil*), the master of the whole existence, the master guide of everyone who gives birth and everyone who was given birth, Muḥammad, the worthy of praise, the Messenger of Allah (*salla allāhu ‘alayhi wa-salām*).”⁴⁴² In other words, Shaykh Al-Jamal asserted that these letters are a name for Muḥammad. (The term *al- ‘insān al-kāmil* may best be translated as the complete person, meaning the person in which the greatest creative potential has been realized.)

We have already seen the opinion that Chapter 36 of the Qur’ān is the heart of the Qur’ān because of its central teachings. Because of that, I offer three different summaries. Theologian Ali Unal says of Yā Sīn: “It deals, using diverse arguments, with three of the pillars of faith, namely the Divine Oneness, afterlife, and Prophethood. God’s Messenger, upon him be peace and blessings, declared that this *sūrah* is the heart of the Qur’ān (at-Timirdhī, ‘Thawāb al-Qur’ān,’ 7) because it stirs up ‘dead’ hearts to awaken them to life. He also advised its recitation over one who is at one’s death-bed.”⁴⁴³ In *The Qur’ān: A new translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem*, Haleem summarizes it as a “sura that emphasizes the divine source of the Qur’ān and defends it from the charge of being poetry made by man.... It warns of the fate of men who are stubborn and always mock God’s revelations. They are reminded of the punishment that befell earlier generations, and of God’s power as shown in His Creation. This proves His ability to bring about the Resurrection, which is emphasized at the end of the sura.”⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴¹ Muḥammad Asad, trans., *The Message of the Qur’ān* (London: The Book Foundation, 2003), 758.

⁴⁴² Shaykh Sidi Muḥammad Sa’id ar-Rifa’i as-Shadhdhuliyah of Quds, *Tafsir* (Canada: Sidi Muḥammad Press, 2015), 8.

⁴⁴³ Ali Unal, *The Qur’ān with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English* (Clifton, New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2012), 904.

⁴⁴⁴ M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur’ān: A new translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), 281.

In his *Tafsir* (exegesis), Shaykh Al-Jamal Al-Rifa'i provides an overview of *Yā Sīn* and the teachings that are central to this chapter and to the Qur'ān:

Sūrah Yā Sīn deals in detail with Islamic creed (*'aqīdah*) [expressing belief in 'Allah and His angels and His Books and His Messengers and in the Last Day, and in *qadar* (fate), both in its good and in its evil aspects'] the arrival of the message (*ar-risālah*) of the Prophet (*salla allāhu 'alayhi wa-salām*), the issues of resurrection (*al-ba'th*) and of the dispersion (*an-nushur*). The *sūrah* addresses the Quraysh who rejected the Qur'ān and covered up the Truth. It also informs us of the Village Folks (*ahlu-al-Qaryah*) who rejected the messengers. The *sūrah* clearly proves the existence of Allah and His Oneness with evidence.

It begins with an oath by the Noble, Divine Recitation (*al-Qur'ān*), affirming that Muḥammad (*salla allāhu 'alayhi wa-salām*) is one of the messengers on the straight path, the path of submission to the will of Allah (*al-'islām*). The *sūrah* then address[es] the issue of the resurrection and how Allah records the deeds of people, and points to the Divine Power (*al-Qudrah*) and Oneness (*a-Wahdāniyyah*), which can be witnessed in the universal signs – the heart, the sun, the moon, the day and the night, and in the cosmos swimming in vast space.

The *sūrah* speaks about the final resurrection (*al-qiyāmah*) prior to the judgment and its horror, and addresses the terror and difficulty that will be experienced before the Last Hour (*as-sā'at al-kubrā*) is established. The *sūrah* explains how the Last Hour will come all of a sudden while people are fighting or quarreling in their market places.

The *sūrah* then directs man to look into his own creation and to how he was created from a minute gamete (*an-nutfah*) and then became an obvious adversary to himself and to nature by opposing the natural laws of Allah. The *sūrah* reminds human beings of the One to Whom the original beginning belongs, the One Who brings forth fire from the green leaves of trees, the One Who created the heavens and the earth, Who is Able to bring bones back to life after they have decayed. This is His power and if He commands a thing to be, it becomes.⁴⁴⁵

Regardless of whether a person engages in the practice of reciting *Yā Sīn* every morning, or engages in recitation of other passages at other times of the day and night, reciting the Qur'ān follows a methodology and process. Graham and Kermani echo Mattson's idea that Qur'ān recitation is like re-creating God's act of revelation; as such, how a worshipper does so is of utmost importance: "Chanting the Qur'ān is potentially an actualization of the revelatory act itself, and thus how the Qur'ān is vocally rendered not only matters, but matters ultimately."⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁵ Shaykh Sidi Muḥammad Sa'id ar-Rifa'i as-Shadhdhuliyah of Quds, *Tafsir* (Canada: Sidi Muḥammad Press, 2015), 7-8.

⁴⁴⁶ Graham and Kermani, 118.

The importance placed on how a worshipper recites Qur'ān led to the development of rules for doing so. A reciter is expected to follow “the methods and rules of oral recitation (cantillation, or *tajwid* (‘rendering excellent’ the Qur'ān).”⁴⁴⁷ These rules of recitation “involve strict standards about when and how to draw out certain vowel sounds or make certain sound effects with consonants.”⁴⁴⁸

As Gade indicates, the Qur'ān itself gives instructions regarding how it is to be recited: “The Qur'ān includes many recommendations about its own recitation, such as to concentrate fully, to recite as an act of supererogatory piety, especially at night, and to ‘remember’ and to ‘preserve’ its message.”⁴⁴⁹ Qur'ān 73:4 instructs the reader to “recite the Qur'ān calmly and distinctly, with thy mind attuned to its meaning.” In addition to providing instruction to concentrate fully, Qur'ān 75:16-19 instructs the reciter to follow a pace that is conducive to receiving what God sees fit to give through it: “Move not thy tongue in haste, [repeating the words of the revelation:] for, behold, it is for Us to gather it [in thy heart,] and to cause it to be read [as it ought to be read]. Thus, when We recite it, follow thou its wording [with all thy mind]: and then, behold, it will be for Us to make its meaning clear.” This reference to God gathering the Qur'ān in the heart of its reciter encourages the reciter to heightened awareness of the heart in the sense of receiving a “heart imprint” as well as in the sense of living by its precepts. Gade offers this explanation: “Engaging the Qur'ān in practice should also conform to the reader’s close and immediate experience of following (*tilāwa*) the Qur'ān in the ‘heart,’ and this pious ideal is central to the tradition of the recited Qur'ān within any pious Islamic

⁴⁴⁷ Graham and Kermani, 116.

⁴⁴⁸ Sells, 162.

⁴⁴⁹ Anna M. Gade, “Recitation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 482.

orientation.”⁴⁵⁰ Mattson addresses the heartfulness of Qur’ān recitation by referring to Kristin Sands, a Sufi scholar of Qur’ān exegesis:

Sands ... quotes the fourth-/tenth-century scholar Abu Nasr al-Sarraj who articulates the importance of reading the Qur’ān with “presence of heart.”

The people of understanding among the people of knowledge know that the only way to correctly connect to that to which the Qur’ān guides us is by pondering, reflecting, being wakeful, recollecting and being present with the heart when reciting the Qur’ān. They know this as well from His words, *A book which We have sent down to you as a blessing so that they might ponder its verses and so that those who possess understanding might recollect* (Sad; 38:29). Pondering, reflecting, and recollecting are only possible through the heart being present because God said, *surely in that there is a remembrance for one who has a heart or will lend an ear with presence* (Qaf; 50:37), that is to say, one who is present with the heart.⁴⁵¹

Thus, Qur’ānic recitation is not only about words; it is also about layers of literal, allegorical, and hidden meanings. It is not only about words and their meanings; it is also about the intertwining of language with sound and emotion. It is not only about this intertwining; it is about receiving the light of God. Qur’ānic recitation is not only an act of the body and mind; it is also a receiving of the heart and soul. It is not only about what is seen and heard; it is also about that which is beyond our perception.

Recitation of the Qur’ān involves several spiritual capacities, namely action, intention, attention, awareness, meaning-making, relationality, feelings, imagination and release. Before reciting Qur’ān, the reciter must first perform the *action* of asking God to lift the state of impurity through performing *wudu* (an ablution process of washing with clean water); *wudu* is generally viewed as a requirement based on the reading of Qur’ān 56:79 as an instruction not to touch the Qur’ān without being purified, although some interpret this *āyāt* (verse) differently. Next the reciter sets her *intention* for the recitation, which will likely include some form of

⁴⁵⁰ Gade, 489.

⁴⁵¹ Mattson, 253, citing Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Qur’ān in Classical Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 30-31.

cultivating the presence of heart referred to earlier. Setting the *intention* will of course depend on the individual. That said, it commonly involves both the intention to obey the injunction in Qur'ān 17:78-79 and to please God by worshipping God with the “most excellent of forms” in accordance with these *ḥadīth*: “You can return to God nothing better than that which came from him, namely the recitation (*al-Qur'ān*)”⁴⁵² and ““The most excellent form of devotion (*ibāda*) among my people is reciting the Qur'ān.””⁴⁵³ Thus the *intention* includes the capacity for *relationality* in that the reciter intends to please God, deepen one's relationship with God, grow in proximity to God, and be receptive to the presence of God. For Sufis, their ontological beliefs and belief in the Qur'ān's “intimations of a hidden meaning”⁴⁵⁴ may lead them to set an intention to receive esoteric knowledge. The Sufis may also set an intention for their recitation to be a means for the extinction of their lower self and their subsistence in God's Oneness, as Martin Lings speaks to here:

The Sufis speak of ‘seeking to be drowned’ (*istighrāq*) in the verses of the Qur'ān which are, according to one of the most fundamental doctrines of Islam, the Uncreated Word of God. What they are seeking is, to use another Sufi term, extinction (*fanā*) of the created in the Uncreated, of the temporal in the Eternal, of the finite in the Infinite; and for some Sufis the recitation of the Qur'ān has been, throughout life, their chief means of concentration upon God which is itself the essence of every spiritual path. . . . Their reading thus becomes the equivalent of a long drawn-out invocation of the Name *Allāh*. Moreover, they are conscious that the Qur'ān is a flow and an ebb – that it flows to them from God and that its verses are miraculous signs (*āyāt*) which will take them back to God, and that is precisely why they read it.⁴⁵⁵

The *action* following setting one's *intention*, in accordance with Qur'ān 16:98, is for the reciter to state, “*A`udhu billahi min ash-shaytan ar-rajim Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahīm*” (I seek refuge

⁴⁵² Graham and Kermani, 115.

⁴⁵³ Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' Ulum Ad-Dīn* vol. 1 (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Al Kotob Al Ilmiyah 2008), 8, quoted in Graham and Kermani, 123.

⁴⁵⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Jewels of the Quran*, 36.

⁴⁵⁵ Lings, 25-26.

in God from Satan, In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate) before beginning the recitation.

Earlier I mentioned the concept that what the reciter receives through the recitation corresponds to the state of her spiritual development and her ontological awareness. In my experience of reciting Qur'ān over the last several years, I have found this concept true both in relation to my intention and in my reaction to the Qur'ān. When I first began reading and reciting the Qur'ān, I approached the Qur'ān from an early stage of the spiritual journey, a stage full of the reactions of a commanding and blaming self. In other words, I approached the Qur'ān with skepticism, and reacted to it with ignorance, and upon occasion, anger. Now, in my post-*fajr* (after the dawn prayer) recitations, which include *Sūrah Yā Sūn*, my basic *intention* is to please God, to grow in love and knowledge of Him and The Holy Qur'ān, to grow in faith, to be purified in heart and soul, to receive the teachings of the Qur'ān as imprinted on my heart so that I will embody them, and to receive God's light in and around me. Now, my reaction to its recitation is pleasure, gratitude, awe, contentment, and a felt sense of God's mercy and love. The *feelings* I now experience, to varying degrees, mirror the Qur'ānic description of the affective response of believers to its recitation, which include falling down, prostrating, weeping, shivering, softening of the skin and heart, trembling of the heart, as well as strengthening of faith and trust (5:83, 8:2, 17:107, 17:109, 19:58, and 39:23).

Further, my *intention* now includes the capacity for *imagination*. While reciting Qur'ān one Ramadan morning a few years ago, for a moment I saw the letters of the Qur'ān as light, with light coming through the letters. Consequently, now I *imagine* what I am reciting as letters of light being written across my heart or being pressed into my heart. I *imagine* turning to God and holding out my heart to God, and I *imagine* the light of the letters of the Qur'ān purifying

and strengthening my heart. When I do, my experience of recitation changes; I feel the turning and opening of my heart and God's responsiveness to this intention.

Reciting requires the capacity for *attention* as the reciter must focus on the words and their meaning, as well as on observing, to the extent of her or his knowledge, the rules of recitation. It also requires *awareness* as the reciter monitors what is happening while reciting. Typically, my recitation occurs at home on the couch, so my need for external awareness is minimal. The need for internal awareness – of images, thoughts, and feelings – however, is high. I approach recitation with an open awareness, i.e., an observation and *release* approach that involves “notic[ing] each thing that comes, internally and externally, but get[ting] fixated on none of them.”⁴⁵⁶ I also sometimes approach recitation with *imagination* by visualizing placing particular thoughts and feelings at the foot of the throne of God, speaking metaphorically, and visualizing sending some thoughts down to be burned away, i.e., purified, in the core of earth. In other words, I am distinguishing between the images, thoughts and feelings that arise during the recitation, and responding to them differently by neutrally releasing some, actively ‘giving to God’ some, and actively purifying others.

Largely, the capacity for *meaning-making* involved in Qur'ānic recitation has been explained in the above descriptions of the religious concepts regarding the Qur'ān as God's “eternal, uncreated word” and the blessings that come from its recitation. To recap, Muslims believe that engaging in recitation of the Qur'ān is a way of engaging in a “rearticulation” of God's revelation of His word – the word that mediates God's presence, God's relationship to humankind, and God's will for humankind. Muslims see recitation as a means of returning to God, a way of healing and being transformed by the light of God that comes through God's

⁴⁵⁶ Andrew Dreitzer, *Living Compassion: Loving Like Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2017), 37.

word, and a means of availing oneself of the Qur’ān’s intercessory power on the Day of Judgment.

Lectio Divina as a Spiritual Formation Practice in Christianity

The practice of *lectio divina* (divine reading) is a form of reading scripture (or, in less traditional forms of *lectio*, of reading other “scriptural books”).⁴⁵⁷ I chose *lectio* for purposes of this research because, like the Islamic practice of Qur’ānic recitation, it focuses on sacred text. Further, like the practice of daily recitation of *Sūrah Yā Sīn* in Islamic Sufism, *lectio* is an individual spiritual formation practice. Though Christian chanting focuses on sacred text, it is a liturgical, i.e., communal, practice rather than an individual one. For example, a Benedictine monk performs Christian chanting as part of congregational worship and performs *lectio* individually. (While *lectio* is primarily an individual spiritual formation practice, it can be done in a group.) I also chose *lectio* because it is a common practice today. Even Gregorian chant, which may be the most vivid and current example of Christian chanting, is not common.

Sister Thelma Hall describes *lectio* as “a holistic way of prayer which disposes, opens and ‘in-forms’ us for the gift of contemplation God waits to give, by leading us to a meeting place with him in our deepest center, his life-giving dwelling place. It begins this movement by introducing us to the power of the word of God in scripture to speak to the most intimate depths of our hearts, to gift and challenge and change us, and to promote genuine spiritual growth and maturity.”⁴⁵⁸ Sister Hall also describes *lectio* as both a “‘listening’ and a ‘hearing,’ attuned to the inspired word and attentive to the Speaker.”⁴⁵⁹ For Hall, *lectio* “leads us to reflect on how we

⁴⁵⁷ Gabriel O’Donnell, “Reading for Holiness: *Lectio Divina*,” in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 46.

⁴⁵⁸ Thelma Hall, *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 7.

⁴⁵⁹ Hall, 36.

should respond to his call in love and service.”⁴⁶⁰ Further, it leads to “a more total turning to God as our true center, to live for him. It is a work which not only takes place in prayer, but issues from it into the concrete particulars of everyday life in our reactions and responses to others and to events.”⁴⁶¹ In other words, our hearts become the ‘home’ of God having answered God’s “call to become love” so that the surrender to God and the realization of God’s loving image that we experience in spiritual practice should be “concretized” in daily life.⁴⁶²

Theologian Reverend Gabriel O’Donnell relates that “the Latin phrase [*lectio divina*] originated in the fourth and fifth centuries and was associated in its beginning with the spirituality of the monastic life.”⁴⁶³ Many other Christian scholars also point to the early church for the beginnings of the practice of *lectio*. Roman Catholic Trappist monk Basil Pennington, however, described *lectio* as an inheritor of “the rich heritage we received from our Jewish sisters and brothers”⁴⁶⁴ from before the time of Christ. Monk and professor Raymond Studzinski likewise points out that Christian religious reading is rooted in the liturgical and private reading of and meditation on the Torah in Judaism. In *Reading to Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, Studzinski traces the detailed evolution of scripture reading from Judaism through Origen, Augustine, the Desert Fathers, Cenobitic Monasticism, Cassian Monasticism, Western Monasticism, St. Benedict, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh of St. Victor, and Guigo II to the revival of *lectio* in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The history of *lectio* in the early church is a rich one. The practice of *lectio divina* has been lauded by early Christian luminaries, such as ascetic and theologian Origen (c.185-c.253),

⁴⁶⁰ Hall, 41.

⁴⁶¹ Hall, 43.

⁴⁶² Hall, 43 and 52-53.

⁴⁶³ O’Donnell, 45.

⁴⁶⁴ M. Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient practice of Praying the Scriptures* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), ix.

theologian and philosopher Augustine of Hippo (354AD-430AD), and Cistercian monk and mystic Bernard of Clairvaux (1090AD-1153AD). Sister Hall emphasizes the origins of the Christian practice of scripture reading in monasticism from “before the sixth century, as attested to in the Rule of St. Benedict.”⁴⁶⁵ In the *Rule of Benedict*, Benedict of Nursia (c.480-c.547) invited his monks to engage in *lectio divina*. Since the time of the early church, *lectio* has remained a monastic practice, “particularly by the monks of the Benedectine-Cistercian (Trappist) tradition,”⁴⁶⁶ but is not exclusively a monastic practice. While in early Christianity it was primarily a practice of monks and nuns, later the practice spread with the increased literacy of Christians and increased accessibility of the Bible. The extent to which it spread is debatable; some experts see the Christian community overall as remaining largely unacquainted with *lectio*.

Foremost, *lectio divina* is a Christian practice. As such, it is founded on the belief in Jesus Christ as the Word of God in person. This belief is accompanied by the belief in the Holy Spirit’s presence with and guidance of the believer in the practice. As Cistercian monk Michael Casey says, “Our reading is not unaided.”⁴⁶⁷ Pennington described four “dispositions” he believed to be key in the practice of *lectio*, seemingly for their role in increasing our receptivity to hearing God through his word. The first, faith, is “a firm belief that the Word of God *is* the Word of God”⁴⁶⁸ and a means by which God communicates to the Christian – “it is in the Word of God that we can most readily hear the Word of God.”⁴⁶⁹ Studzinski’s perspective concurs with this first disposition; Studzinski writes that *lectio* “begins with the firm belief that God speaks in

⁴⁶⁵ Hall, 9.

⁴⁶⁶ Hall, 9.

⁴⁶⁷ Casey, 47.

⁴⁶⁸ Pennington, 5.

⁴⁶⁹ Pennington, 30.

many ways and places and certainly through sacred texts.”⁴⁷⁰ Pennington described his second disposition, humility, as an “acceptance of our profound ignorance”⁴⁷¹ and an awareness of our neediness that renders our longing for God like hunger and thirst. Pennington’s idea of humility is echoed by O’Donnell’s statement that *lectio* “is a form of surrender, of letting go” of our ideas of personal knowledge and will to open to God’s knowledge and will. Studzinski also emphasizes the importance of humility that fosters openness to “a rich array of meaning.”⁴⁷² Pennington’s third disposition, openness, is being open “to all that is possible”⁴⁷³ in a moment of meeting God. The fourth, faithfulness, has to do with constancy, with ‘showing up’ in the practice “again and again.”⁴⁷⁴ Elsewhere, Pennington asserted that repentance for our shortcomings, “an honest desire to change,” and willingness “to be changed by the Word of God” are necessary for “true *lectio*.”⁴⁷⁵ Pennington described *lectio* as a “communication of love” that requires the “sensitivity of lovers” in order to “intuit ... what the Divine Lover is seeking to convey to us through his Words of Love;” for Pennington, this sensitivity and receptivity require an embrace of the Holy Spirit to enter “into a unity of spirit with the Divine Spirit of Love.”⁴⁷⁶

Similarly, Casey describes the dispositions he feels are a necessary part of a committed *lectio* practice: fidelity, assiduity, reverence and compunction. For Casey, *lectio* is “always an encounter with the Church as sacrament”⁴⁷⁷ and as such, should be approached with a sense of

⁴⁷⁰ Frances Young, *Virtuous Theology: The Bible and Interpretation* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1993), 213, quoted in Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina* (Liturgical Press, 2009) muse.jhu.edu/book/46780, 210.

⁴⁷¹ Pennington, 6.

⁴⁷² Studzinski, 215.

⁴⁷³ Pennington, 7.

⁴⁷⁴ Pennington, 8-9.

⁴⁷⁵ Pennington, 17.

⁴⁷⁶ Pennington, 9.

⁴⁷⁷ Casey, 42.

the sacredness of an act of worship. Casey describes reverence as “the sobriety of spirit that stems from an experience of the otherness of God which makes us want to subdue self, remain silent, and to submit. We are overwhelmed by the greatness of God present and are reluctant to spoil the occasion by the intrusion of our own fatuity.”⁴⁷⁸ His description of reverence echoes Pennington’s espousal of humility; Casey writes that “be[ing] humble before the mystery of God ... is the key to unlocking the depths of revelation.”⁴⁷⁹ For Casey, reverence is what engenders silence, which in turn engenders listening. With reverence, we will “respect” and “safeguard” the text of the Bible and our reading of it.⁴⁸⁰ Reverence is also key because it is responsible for “a determination to put into practice the good news encountered in *lectio*.”⁴⁸¹ Casey describes compunction as a “sensibility to God” that affects our feelings and increases our receptivity to God and our willingness to be influenced by God.⁴⁸² Hall’s description of *lectio* as a “love relationship with God which develops in prayer”⁴⁸³ over time accords with Casey’s ‘requirements’ of fidelity and assiduity and Pennington’s disposition of faithfulness. Her description of how we must approach God in *lectio* are compatible with Casey’s ideas of reverence and compunction; Hall advises that “in some comparable interior or exterior way [to how Moses approached the burning bush] we too must acknowledge the holiness of the God we approach, recognizing the wonder and mystery of the gift of faith which enables us to consciously come before him in prayer.”⁴⁸⁴ Hall’s advice evokes a profound reverence, an awe of being, like Moses, conversant with God.

⁴⁷⁸ Casey, 26.

⁴⁷⁹ Casey, 27.

⁴⁸⁰ Casey, 27.

⁴⁸¹ Casey, 28.

⁴⁸² Casey, 29-32.

⁴⁸³ Hall, 27.

⁴⁸⁴ Hall, 39.

Hall describes the aim of *lectio* as “deep level of communication with the Divine.”⁴⁸⁵ Studzinski writes, “The goal ... [of *lectio*], it could not be much clearer, is connecting with God.”⁴⁸⁶ For O’Donnell, *lectio* “is done purely and simply to come to know God, to be brought before his Word, to listen.”⁴⁸⁷ Pennington describes the goal of *lectio* similarly: “We come to *lectio* not so much seeking ideas, concepts, insights, or even motivating graces; we come to *lectio* seeking God himself and nothing less than God. We come seeking the experience of the presence of the living God, to be with him and to allow him to be with us in whatever way he wishes.... we want the Word to expand our receptivity, our listening, to allow space for more and more of the divine wisdom, knowledge, and understanding.”⁴⁸⁸

For Casey, the goal of *lectio*, like other forms of Christian prayer, is “to be and to live ‘in Christ’ – nothing less.... It is a school in which we learn Christ.”⁴⁸⁹ Casey describes *lectio* as “fundamentally an expression of our desire for God”⁴⁹⁰ and as “an essential element in the flowering of contemplation.”⁴⁹¹ He describes contemplation as being characterized by 1) “a recession from ordinary sensate and intellectual awareness and all the concerns and programs that depend upon it,” and 2) “being possessed by the reality and mystery of God.”⁴⁹² In other words, Casey, like Pennington and O’Donnell, describes “union with God” as an outcome of contemplation, and Casey is clear about this unity being a unity “to all the whole creation” and a “solidarity with all humanity.”⁴⁹³ Casey’s conception of unity is noteworthy. It is not the unity of

⁴⁸⁵ Hall, 7.

⁴⁸⁶ Studzinski, 213.

⁴⁸⁷ O’Donnell, 47.

⁴⁸⁸ Pennington, 27.

⁴⁸⁹ Casey, 38-39.

⁴⁹⁰ Casey, 8.

⁴⁹¹ Casey, 39.

⁴⁹² Casey, 39.

⁴⁹³ Casey, 39-40.

a sage alone on a mountaintop or a guru alone in a cave; rather, it is the unity of one who lives like Christ. As he said, “We read with the purpose of evangelizing our lives.”⁴⁹⁴

Hall likewise emphasizes that the goal of *lectio* is the same goal as other forms of Christian prayer, i.e., the actualization of Jesus’s teachings, including his teachings based on Matthew 10:38: “He who seeks only his illusory false self brings his true self to ruin; whereas he who brings his false self to naught for me discovers who he is – i.e., the image of God, his true self;” and 1 Corinthians 2:9: “‘To become love’ – this is the sum and substance of Jesus’ teaching, and our ultimate fulfillment.”⁴⁹⁵ Hall also states explicitly that with *lectio* she aims “to personalize the words, to real-ize them, as God speaking to *me, now*.”⁴⁹⁶

The process of *lectio divina* begins with selecting the scripture to be read for the practice. Generally, scholars and practitioners recommend any scripture, including scripture from the Catholic Church’s lectionary and scripture identified for the practice of *lectio continuata* (reading scripture continuously in sequence over a period of time without omissions), as well as texts reflecting on the scripture. On the topic of what reading is appropriate for *lectio*, Casey includes “liturgical texts, select writings of the Father (and Mothers) of the Church, the eminent teachers (or ‘Doctors’) of the past (such as Teresa and John of the Cross) and some of the mystics (Julian of Norwich ... Meister Eckhart). For Roman Catholics there are many official documents of the *magisterium* that are fine for meditation and prayer: Council texts (especially Vatican II), some papal encyclicals and so forth. Some sections of the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* are suitable.”⁴⁹⁷ For many, scripture is preferred over these texts about scripture. Pennington expressed such a preference: “I personally think that for the most part we

⁴⁹⁴ Casey, 72.

⁴⁹⁵ Hall, 24.

⁴⁹⁶ Hall, 37.

⁴⁹⁷ Casey, 104.

do best turning to the inspired Word itself for our lectio and using the other texts more for study and motivational reading.”⁴⁹⁸ Casey suggests caution is warranted in relation to using liturgical readings for *lectio* because of the limitations of excerpts and the strictures of the liturgical cycle; instead he recommends “learn[ing] to be led by our own attractions and to stay with them for as long as they exercise their fascination over us.”⁴⁹⁹ Casey also cautions that “texts of tradition do not replace Scripture”⁵⁰⁰ while also lauding the value of patristic *lectio* because of the edification in studying the Church Fathers’ experience, such as their experience of “understanding the dynamics of virtue and vice,” and “mystical union.”⁵⁰¹

Casey suggests his preference for the “traditional practice” (and Saint Benedict’s recommendation) of “reading whole books, if we are reading the Scriptures, and not just selections”⁵⁰² in order to understand the book as a whole, using the epistle of Saint Paul as an example. Casey emphasizes that *lectio* is “a sober, long term undertaking and, as such, better reflected in sustained attention to whole books than in seeking a quick fix from selected texts.”⁵⁰³ Other scholars and practitioners seem to take a more open approach to the practice; for example, in *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*, Sister Hall provides the references to 500 scripture passages that she has organized by fifty themes, such as accepting love, anxiety, compassion, and discipleship.

Lectio divina is widely seen as being a four-part practice based on the *Ladder of Monks*, written by Guigo II, the ninth Prior of the Grand Chartreuse; the four parts are *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. *Lectio* refers to reading a passage of scripture and identifying or being

⁴⁹⁸ Pennington, 72.

⁴⁹⁹ Casey, 13.

⁵⁰⁰ Casey, 104.

⁵⁰¹ Casey, 105-111.

⁵⁰² Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 1995), 5.

⁵⁰³ Casey, 9.

guided to a word or phrase from that passage to help you remember and apply its message; Casey describes this first part as “the gathering of the Sacred Text and the plucking of the Word that we will use all day to remember God’s message to us.”⁵⁰⁴ In other words, this first element of *lectio divina* involves a sustained practice of “listening for God in his Word and in his creation.”⁵⁰⁵

Meditatio refers to meditation on the passage of scripture, which means different things for different people. For some, *meditatio* will involve an Ignatian meditation on a scene in an effort to perceive the underlying reality depicted by the text. In *The Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola in the Western Tradition*, anthropologist and theologian Javier Melloni explores the correspondence of St. Ignatius’ prayer exercises with Guigo II’s four stages of *lectio*. Melloni points out that St. Ignatius refers to “visible meditations [that] correspond fundamentally to the contemplations of the evangelical scenes. The scenes become the scenario in which the position of the exercitant passes from that of spectator to that of actor – ‘as if I were present’ (EE 114,2).”⁵⁰⁶ This kataphatic form, in which the stages of the practice and sense of God’s presence increase with imagining oneself present in the evangelical scene, began with the late Medieval Franciscans, was adopted by the Benedictines, and from them, by Ignatius. It differs from the Medieval Benedictine apophatic form described below in which the stages of *lectio* and sense of God’s presence increase as the words and images decrease. The former can be described as “pray[ing] into and with the images [scripture] offer us,” and the latter as “praying with scripture toward wordless, no-thing-ness.”⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁴ Pennington, 59.

⁵⁰⁵ Pennington, 63.

⁵⁰⁶ Javier Melloni, *The Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola in the Western Tradition* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), 26.

⁵⁰⁷ Andrew Dreitcer, “Kataphatic and Ignatian Prayer (with a bit of Apophatic traditions and Buddhism)” (Handout received in Christian Spiritualities Across the Ages with Professor Andrew Dreitcer, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, California, February 3, 2017).

For others, their *meditatio* will take different forms, even forms somewhat akin to the Sufi practice of ongoing remembrance of God through one of His names. Pennington points out that the desert fathers “spoke of the mind descending into the heart.” In this type of mind-heart meditation, mindfulness of the “word of life” that emerged from the scripture reading was repeated throughout the day in the mind and the heart, and perhaps on the lips, which led to a heartfulness – a heartfulness of “expanding the listening that we are, opening us to allow the fullness of Reality to come in, to see things as God sees them, forming in us the mind of Christ ... allowing the Word to break open and reform us.”⁵⁰⁸ Like the reading of the scripture in the *lectio* phase, the mindfulness-heartfulness meditation is a sustained practice that extends through the day.

Likewise with the third phase, *oratio*, which refers to prayer of “thanksgiving, praise, petition, repentance, adoration.”⁵⁰⁹ Pennington describes this part of *lectio divina* as repeating the word of life and carrying it with us in such a way that it “color[s] the way we see and think and act, making the Lord present so that we communicate with him, maybe in thought, maybe in word, maybe just in a sense of presence, of ‘withness.’”⁵¹⁰ In other words, the way we hold the word of life from the scripture reading in our consciousness increases our awareness of God’s presence in what we encounter in our day. Hall describes *oratio* as “the active effort we make to keep our hearts open to him and to put ourselves at the disposal of his Spirit, preparing the way for God’s action to supersede our own.”⁵¹¹ For Hall, *oratio* is a “prayer of the heart,” a prayer in which “our hearts are opened to him and by him, so that his light may enter.”⁵¹² As we

⁵⁰⁸ Pennington, 61.

⁵⁰⁹ Pennington, 63.

⁵¹⁰ Pennington, 64.

⁵¹¹ Hall, 42.

⁵¹² Hall, 42.

“cooperate” in this opening and receiving of the heart, we increase in “holy desire” through which we move from the dominance and illusion of the “false self” to the “true self, ‘the image and likeness of God.’”⁵¹³

The fourth phase, *contemplatio* refers to contemplation; Pennington describes *contemplatio* as “being with,”⁵¹⁴ as “abid[ing] with God within his temple.”⁵¹⁵ Pennington’s discussion of *contemplatio* portrays this phase as characterized by a deeper receptivity to God, of letting go of all distractions to be present to God. Hall clarifies that *contemplatio* “is not a terminus but a new and crucial beginning,” which she describes as a time for “receptive passivity” and a time “not to *do* but simply to *be*.”⁵¹⁶ Hall refers to Psalm 37:7 for instruction regarding *contemplatio*: “stay quiet before Yahweh, wait longingly for him.”⁵¹⁷

Just as Sufis correlate ontological categories and the reciter’s spiritual development with levels of meaning in the Qur’ān, Pennington correlates the four *lectio* stages – *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio* – to progressions in our relationship with God, as well as to ‘layers’ of meaning in our interpretation of scripture. He associates *lectio* with acquaintanceship with God and the scripture’s literal meaning, *meditatio* with friendly companionship with God and scripture’s allegorical interpretation, *oratio* with friendship with God and a tropological/moral sense of scripture, and *contemplatio* with union with God and an anagogical/unitive sense of scripture.⁵¹⁸ Casey similarly correlates layers of scripture meaning with human faculties and the four elements of *lectio divina*. Casey ties *lectio* to the intellect understanding a literal sense of the scripture, *meditatio* with memory contextualizing the meaning through a Christological sense of

⁵¹³ Hall, 42-43.

⁵¹⁴ Pennington, 64.

⁵¹⁵ Pennington, 65.

⁵¹⁶ Hall, 45, 47, and 49.

⁵¹⁷ Hall, 51.

⁵¹⁸ Pennington, 77 & 108.

scripture, *oratio* with conscience by which the human lives the meaning of the text in a behavioral sense, and *contemplatio* with spirit serving to support the human in “meeting God in the text” in a mystical sense.⁵¹⁹ O’Donnell’s description of *lectio* is remarkably similar: “What begins as God addressing us and our responding leads eventually to an experience of union. Through the power of the Word of God proclaimed and heard, we are drawn into the presence of God, into the heart of God, to be in perfect harmony with the divine will.”⁵²⁰

While Pennington believed that *lectio* always involved the entire four-part process, he also believed in making the practice simple and accessible. To that end, he provided the following method for the practice:

1. Take the Sacred Text with reverence and call upon Holy Spirit.
2. For ten minutes (or longer, if you are so drawn), listen to the Lord speaking to you through the Text and respond to him.
3. At the end of the time, choose a word or phrase (perhaps one will have been ‘given’ to you) to take with you, and thank the Lord for being with you and speaking to you.⁵²¹

For step two, Pennington proposes, “You might try reading it aloud – not just seeing the words with your eye but speaking them with your lips and tongue and hearing them with your ear.”⁵²²

Pennington’s suggestion for a ten-minute listening period is to make the practice easily doable on a daily basis. O’Donnell recommends thirty minutes and “certainly not less than fifteen minutes.”⁵²³ In contrast, Casey notes that Benedict “envisaged his monks making about three hours a day available for personal *lectio*.”⁵²⁴

Not only does Pennington simplify the practice, he encourages ritualizing it. He suggests incorporating a preparatory ritual: “We take the book with reverence and kneel down. We call

⁵¹⁹ Casey, 57.

⁵²⁰ O’Donnell, 48.

⁵²¹ Pennington, 151.

⁵²² Pennington, 3.

⁵²³ O’Donnell, 49.

⁵²⁴ Casey, 5.

upon Holy Spirit for help. Then we listen to the first words on our knees and kiss the text, and only then do we sit down to continue our lectio.”⁵²⁵ Hall also encourages an explicit calling upon the Holy Spirit as part of the process, stating that “prayer is always a gifted *response* to the loving initiative of the Holy Spirit. And since all prayer is his gift, it is appropriate that we ask for what we seek.... it might be to claim the promise of Jesus by asking the Holy Spirit to teach me how to open my mind and heart to hear and understand what Jesus is saying to me.”⁵²⁶ Casey also recommends the incorporation of ritual, as well as other methods of reminding ourselves of the sacredness of this practice, such as attending to where and how we engage in the practice.

Like Pennington, Hall recommends preparing for the practice of *lectio divina*. Hall advises first settling the mind and body and assuming a posture with a relaxed but erect spine in order to focus wholeheartedly and reverentially on the “*living* word of God, intimately present to me.”⁵²⁷ She prefers slowly reading a short text. Hall also points out that “the experience of this movement is not a programmed or automatic 1-2-3-4 progression,” but instead is a “‘flow’ which has an inner direction.”⁵²⁸ In addition, she acknowledges both the personal nature of the practice, in that “the same text is heard by each individual in a wholly unique way,” as well as the ebb and flow of a sense of connection to God and the experience of feeling God’s presence. In those moments when the practitioner feels disconnected, Hall advocates “simply ‘being with’ the Lord in a disposition of love and trust.”⁵²⁹

Like Pennington and Hall, Casey also advocates for preparation. Casey, who disclosed that he writes on the “aspects of *lectio divina* that become important only after sustained

⁵²⁵ Pennington, 33-34.

⁵²⁶ Hall, 40.

⁵²⁷ Hall, 36.

⁵²⁸ Hall, 32.

⁵²⁹ Hall, 37-38.

practice,” recommends extensive study in preparation for doing *lectio*, including study of background culture, biblical languages, methods of composition, and theological synthesis.⁵³⁰ Similarly, Studzinski cites Sandra Schneiders’ recommendation to engage in *lectio* with historical-critical exegesis, literary analysis, and spiritual exegesis.⁵³¹ Studzinski also points out that philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s “approach to textual interpretation illuminates the transformative power of *lectio* and fits into Schneiders’ elaboration of how people appropriate texts.”⁵³² This level of preparation and practice is rigorous; Ricoeur’s approach involves a three-part process of approaching the text, then analyzing it, then approaching it again with “a deeper awareness” and new insights.⁵³³

In some of her writing on *lectio divina* Benedictine Macrina Wiederkehr presents the same four *lectio-meditatio-oratio-contemplatio* stages, while in *The Song of the Seed: A Monastic Way of Tending the Soul* she suggest six stages: quieting the soul, which is “a silent time for becoming receptive,” reflective reading, contemplative sitting, meditation, prayer, and then “journaling as a way to end the day, reflecting on how the text has influenced our day.”⁵³⁴ Wiederkehr’s six stages are not so different from those citing the four stages and suggesting preparation for the practice. In fact, Wiederkehr’s sixth stage of end-of-day reflection and journaling highlights the sustained nature of the practice, i.e., the practice continues beyond the allotted time for reading-meditation-prayer-contemplation through the day as the practitioner strives to “carry the word” and embody its message. Along these same lines, theologian Hugh of

⁵³⁰ Casey, 64-70

⁵³¹ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Biblical Spirituality,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 56, no. 2 (2002), 136, quoted in Studzinski, 197.

⁵³² Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 74, quoted in Studzinski, 198.

⁵³³ Studzinski, 198.

⁵³⁴ Macrina Wiederkehr, *The Song of the Seed: A Monastic Way of Tending the Soul* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 10-20, quoted in Bradley P. Holt, *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 46.

Saint-Victor (1096-1141) proposed *action*, i.e., the act of faithfully applying the message received in the practice, as a fifth step to Guigo II's *lectio-meditatio-oratio-contemplatio* process.⁵³⁵ Wiederkehr's sixth step and Hugh of Saint-Victor's fifth step highlight that *lectio divina* is a transformative practice. While the spiritual transformation associated with *lectio divina* has been referenced earlier, especially in relation to the transformation of the false self to the true self, the idea of *lectio divina* as transformative is worth repeating. For Pennington, the result of prayer and contemplation in *lectio divina* should be compassion and action. Per O'Donnell, "this mingling of prayer and reading that we call *lectio divina* brings us into contact with God, and through the liberating power of the Word of God we begin the journey into wisdom. Ultimately, our personal liberation and transformation enables us to encourage similar liberation in our brothers and sisters who hunger for God and the peace of the kingdom."⁵³⁶ For Casey, "the major determinant of prayer or *lectio* is our fidelity to seeking God in everyday behavior."⁵³⁷ In other words, when we engage in *lectio divina*, we are changed by it, especially when we strive to actualize God's "call to become love" in our daily lives.

The practice of *lectio divina* involves many spiritual capacities. As the process descriptions above illustrate, *lectio* involves many internal and external actions, from selecting a passage from scripture or related text, receiving/identifying a representative word or phrase, "mumbling the phrase,"⁵³⁸ to simply "being with." As with every spiritual practice, the foundational capacities of *intention*, *awareness*, and *attention* play a key role in *lectio divina*. As with every spiritual practice, *intention* in *lectio divina* is of primary importance, especially so in

⁵³⁵ Duncan Robertson, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading*. (Liturgical Press, 2011) muse.jhu.edu/book/46737, xvii.

⁵³⁶ O'Donnell, 50.

⁵³⁷ Casey, 9.

⁵³⁸ O'Donnell, 47.

the *intention* to be available to the presence of God, to listen to God's message, and to actualize Jesus' teachings. The *intention* involves *relationality* as the practitioner strives to listen to the personal message God has for the practitioner in the text being repeated, and thereby "to come to know God."⁵³⁹ *Lectio divina* requires *attention*; the practitioner must concentrate on the text being read, focus on it, and seek to understand its message; it requires "ponder[ing] it, rest[ing] in it."⁵⁴⁰ *Lectio divina* requires internal *awareness* of the thoughts, feelings, and mental images evoked by the sacred text as well as the mind-heart inner flow, the state of *attention*, etc.

Hall's approach to reflecting on scripture indicates the *relationality* of the practitioner to God through the practice; she "anticipate[s] an exchange between us which will be a deepening of our growing relationship" and desire to "know more about him, to welcome him into my life and open up to him, in greater trust and confidence ... to learn who he really is for me and what he wants to reveal to me."⁵⁴¹ In fact, *relationality* as a spiritual capacity stands out in Hall's approach to *lectio divina*; she describes the third stage, *oratio*, as "the unique and spontaneous voice of the heart which is touched by God and reaches out to him in ardent love."⁵⁴² Moreover, through an ongoing practice, God becomes "the realized center of our lives, and we begin to experience the longing of lovers for union: the desire to be totally given, and totally received."⁵⁴³

The practice of *lectio divina* involves *release* of distracting thoughts as well as *release* of personal agenda as a "form of surrender, of letting go."⁵⁴⁴ It may also involve the use of *imagination*, as in the aforementioned example provided by O'Donnell in which the practitioner repeats "the Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" and imagines "a shepherd leading his sheep

⁵³⁹ O'Donnell, 47.

⁵⁴⁰ O'Donnell, 47.

⁵⁴¹ Hall, 38.

⁵⁴² Hall, 44.

⁵⁴³ Hall, 44.

⁵⁴⁴ O'Donnell, 49.

into lush and peaceful pastures.”⁵⁴⁵ Hall encourages an individual approach to *lectio divina* that requires self-awareness. Hall indicates that some practitioners are best suited for using the capacity for *imagination*, like the use of imagery in St. Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, while others will glean more from the practice by “savoring the truth or insight inherent in the passage, deeply interiorizing what Jesus is saying by allowing his words to repeat themselves slowly again and again, in the depths of the heart, until it is deeply penetrated with Jesus’ assuring love, and spontaneously responds in kind.”⁵⁴⁶ These latter, “less imaginative” practitioners are best suited for the capacity for an intuitive *awareness*.

Theologian Frances Young draws our attention to the spiritual capacity for *imagination* and for *feelings* involved in the practice of *lectio divina*: “It is characteristic of literary texts to draw the reading or audience into their world, partly by exploiting emotional identification, partly by presenting an image of the real world which clarifies understanding of that real world.”⁵⁴⁷ Theologian and scriptural scholar William Spohn described the interplay of *imagination*, *emotion* and memory in reading scripture: “The [biblical] stories turn the emotions to God in faith through the paradigms that have been absorbed in prayer.... Over time, we build up a repository of these scenes and the related emotions, which are stored together in memory. They enrich our appreciation of the Gospels and guide our emotions to live a life consonant with their script.”⁵⁴⁸ Largely, the capacity for *meaning-making* involved in *lectio divina* has been explained in the above descriptions of the religious concepts regarding scripture as the word of God and as the means by which the Christian hears the voice of God. *Lectio divina* also involves

⁵⁴⁵ O’Donnell, 48.

⁵⁴⁶ Hall, 40.

⁵⁴⁷ Studzinski, 149.

⁵⁴⁸ William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 141, quoted in Studzinski, 207.

the capacity for *meaning-making* in its bringing together of scripture with our life experience, especially as we explore how the message received through the practice applies to how we live, speak, and ‘act out’ our faith in our daily lives.

In both Qur’ ānic recitation and *lectio divina* we see ways of engaging sacred text that are grounded in faith in and reverence for God, and a sincere desire to listen to and follow the voice of God. With both we see practices based in concepts of a deepening relationship with God as well as a concomitant deepening of understanding. With both, this relationship and understanding is tied to progressive layers of meaning leading to a unitive sense of sacred text and of God. With both we see a firm belief in the spiritual transformation possible through a sustained practice. Further, through both Qur’ ānic recitation and *lectio divina* believers seek to embody union with God in relation to others; they seek to manifest the reality of their loving relationship with God by “becoming love” in relation to all of creation. Regarding this common goal, Hall writes the following:

To see every woman and every man as sister and brother is to participate in the faith vision of the mystic, whose central intuition is the unity and oneness of ALL, in God. It is a graced effect of contemplation, which gradually transforms our way of seeing reality. This mystical vision is far from an esoteric or ‘misty’ dream, for surely the survival of our planet depends on a universal realization of this unity and the interconnectedness of all peoples and of all the cosmos, in the one Love which is God.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁹ Hall, 55.

Chapter 5

What Neuroscience and Psychophysiology Might Tell Us

About Spiritual Formation Practices

Introduction

Chapter 13 verse 11 of the Holy Qur'ān states, “Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.” This verse has long captured my attention and repeated musings. The commentary in *The Study Qur'an* offers two understandings of this verse. The first is that God does not change the blessings awarded a person in this life “until they misuse these blessings to disobey God.”⁵⁵⁰ The second is that “God will not alter the positive or negative circumstances of people until they themselves bring about changes in their actions and lives.”⁵⁵¹ This second meaning, that God does not change our circumstances until we make changes ourselves, in conjunction with the idea that God's messages and signs are both in the universe around us and *in ourselves* (from verses like Qur'ān 41:53 and 45:3-4), elicits the question -- what signs and messages are in human physiology and how can we respond to those signs and messages in a way that brings about the changes – the spiritual transformation – we seek. This question leads to consideration of neuroscientific and psychophysiological findings in relation to spiritual practices.

⁵⁵⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, Desert Mountain High School Collection (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2015), 1376, https://archive.org/details/TheStudyQuran_201708/page/n1375.

⁵⁵¹ Nasr et al., 1376.

A Cautionary Note

Exploration of the intersection of spirituality, neuroscience, and psychophysiology should acknowledge that this area of research is a relatively new field. As such, even the findings of experts are best viewed as interpretation. Even though this area of research is a new field, a huge volume of research has been done, especially in relation to meditation. I want to investigate questions like the following: What current neuroscientific and psychophysiological studies and understandings say about spiritual practices? How do neuroscientific and psychophysiological perspectives help us (or not) engage in spiritual practices? I am especially interested in what happens physiologically, emotionally, and spiritually when someone reads or recites the sacred text. That said, this exploration is just that – an exploration. As such, it provides examples of what experts have concluded.

Conclusions in this field include contradictory views with concrete facts remaining elusive and with varied descriptions and explanations remaining plentiful. Moreover, conclusions in this field are informed by the researchers' focus. As previously mentioned, much of the neuroscientific research focuses on meditation. For example, much of neuroscientist Andrew Newberg's research relates to meditation and mindfulness. Other researchers may have an interest in healing through intentional generation of emotional states that are "likely to produce physiological coherence [ordered, harmonious function]"⁵⁵² or they may have an interest in spiritual transformation through the intentional engagement of a relational experience of God's love. For example, much of psychophysiolgist Rollin McCraty's research focuses on generative emotional states, like kindness and caring connection with others, and associated physiological

⁵⁵² Alane Daugherty, "Embodied Spirituality: Where We Are, Where We're Going" (Handout received in Embodied Spirituality: The Psychophysiology of Contemplative Practice with Professor Alane Daugherty, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA, October 26, 2016), 5.

coherence (see the Heart Rate Variability section below for McCraty's description of physiological coherence). These respective foci impact research findings – some of the research provides a glimpse into a cortex (outermost layer of the brain) to limbic system (brain structures dealing with emotions and memory) process while other research provides a glimpse into spiritual or contemplative practices that target the limbic system specifically. Health sciences professor Alane Daugherty summarizes these two approaches as follows: “While mindfulness practices typically foster non-reactivity through awareness, essentially using the frontal cortex to train and calm the limbic system, intentional affect activities engage the limbic system directly. In other words, intentionally creating a specific state of affect trains the limbic system to be more adept at operating from that affect. Additionally, research has shown that specific states of affect go directly to the amygdala to calm the whole system.”⁵⁵³ In brief, the neocortex and frontal lobe are associated with cognitive thought, ideas, and concepts about God, while the limbic system is associated with the experience of God. (More information on the parts of the brain follow in the “Brain Basics” section.) These approaches, i.e., a cortex to limbic process versus targeting the limbic system specifically, are relevant when considering a researcher's conclusions.

Some neuroscientists, like Cliff Saron, emphasize the need to interpret brain activity research carefully, advising that “looking at apparent brain activity shown by the fMRI in a particular region and making an assumption about what is going on there based on what other research has shown about that region” is an “educated guess;” Saron states that these conclusions do “not qualify as conclusive evidence of a particular kind of brain activity.”⁵⁵⁴ Descriptions of functions associated with particular parts of the brain may be best considered as metaphorical;

⁵⁵³ Daugherty, “Embodied Spirituality,” 7.

⁵⁵⁴ Barry Boyce, “The Magnificent, Mysterious, Wild, Connected and Interconnected Brain,” *Mindfulness* (June 12, 2018), <https://www.mindful.org/the-magnificent-mysterious-wild-connected-and-interconnected-brain/>, [accessed December 8, 2019], 11.

the prevailing view today is that “the brain organizes itself into functional networks that vary in their activity and their interactions over time.”⁵⁵⁵ Neuroscientists today believe that the brain functions through “dynamic interconnected sets of systems (subsystems, and neural nodes) that work together to carry out certain kinds of activity,’ in Amishi Jha’s words.”⁵⁵⁶ The literature in the field of neuroscience and meditation emphasizes three networks:

- 1) the *salience network*, which “filters and sorts the [sensory] inputs ... [and] allows us to focus our attention in order to achieve a goal,”
- 2) the *central-executive network*, which “has to do with higher-order cognition and attentional control ... problem solving [and decision making],” and
- 3) the *default mode network*, which “processes self-monitoring, autobiographical information, and social cognition ... spontaneous mind wandering and self-talk,” is described in terms of the brain’s “default mode” when not engaged in a particular task.⁵⁵⁷

(Author and lecturer Brian L. Lancaster identifies five networks from the work of Peter Malinowski: the alerting network, the default mode network, the salience network, the executive network, and the orienting network.⁵⁵⁸) Saron grants that network descriptions like those above are “several notches closer to reality than what you hear so often in popular depictions”; at the same time, he cautions that “a very large proportion of the information processing we are doing is unconscious yet intelligent. It’s awe-inspiring to appreciate that we function with most all of

⁵⁵⁵ Boyce, 6.

⁵⁵⁶ Boyce, 11.

⁵⁵⁷ Boyce, 11.

⁵⁵⁸ Brian L. Lancaster, “Hermeneutic Neurophenomenology in the Science-Religion Dialogue: Analysis of States of Consciousness in the *Zohar*” *Religions* 6 (2015), 147, citing Peter Malinowski, “Neural Mechanisms of Attentional Control in Mindfulness Meditation,” *Frontiers in Neuroscience* 7 (2013).

our processing of the world below the level of conscious awareness.”⁵⁵⁹ Saron underscores that fully understanding the human brain is not possible, noting that “science is a human social activity that undergoes changes based on the zeitgeist of the time.”⁵⁶⁰

Brain Basics

Exploration of our brain activity has been of growing interest for scientists, theologians, and lay persons. Practical theologian David A. Hogue has focused much of his scholarship on how social neurosciences and ritual studies contribute to Christian ministry, worship and care. Social neuroscience is the interdisciplinary field that “draws on cognitive and social psychology, along with cognitive and developmental neurobiology, to deepen our comprehension of human relational process,” looking at both brain processes and structures and social processes.⁵⁶¹ In Hogue’s presentation of findings related to neurological structures and how they function, Hogue is careful to point out that not all neuroscientists interpret their research findings in the same way; he also acknowledges that he simplifies “highly complex processes.”⁵⁶² In the following exploration of what neuroscience and psychophysiology might tell us about ourselves and our spiritual formation practices, I too simplify descriptions of brain structures and processes. Even so, defining some related terms may assist the reader with gleaning the most useful understanding of those neuroscientific findings.

⁵⁵⁹ Boyce, 6.

⁵⁶⁰ Boyce, 5.

⁵⁶¹ David A. Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” *Religious Education* 107, no. 4 (2012), 348.

⁵⁶² David Hogue, “Brain Matters: Neuroscience, Empathy, and Pastoral Theology,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 20, no. 2 (2010), 29.

The human brain is made of *neurons* (a “nerve cell responsible for transmission of electrical impulses,”⁵⁶³ i.e., they transfer information and encode our experiences⁵⁶⁴). An electrical charge carries information to other neurons through a synaptic connection by means of a *neurotransmitter* (a biochemical that “helps the synapse fire and transfer the information”).⁵⁶⁵ The brain has about 10 billion neurons, each of which has from 10,000 to 100,000 synaptic connections. *Glia* cells help hold neurons together, transfer information, supply neurons with nutrients, and prune neurons no longer in use. *Neural networks* are “interconnected neurons that together perform a function.”⁵⁶⁶ They also connect to other neural networks. Understanding that these networks “are complex and [that] their inter-relationships are equally complex”⁵⁶⁷ is important at the outset.

The *neocortex* is “the outermost surface of the brain, consisting of four divisions or lobes: frontal, temporal, parietal, and occipital” in each of the brain’s left and right hemispheres.⁵⁶⁸ Abstract thinking takes place in the frontal regions of the brain. The *frontal lobe* “cover[s] approximately one-half of the upper front of the human neocortex ... [it] is particularly active in planning, empathy, and working memory”⁵⁶⁹ as well as logic, reason, and “processing information.”⁵⁷⁰ Increased activity of the left-prefrontal lobe is “associated with positive emotions and reduced stress, along with improvements in the immune system.”⁵⁷¹ For this

⁵⁶³ David Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past: Story, Ritual, and the Human Brain* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 201.

⁵⁶⁴ Alane Daugherty, *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness* (Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press, 2014), 44.

⁵⁶⁵ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 44.

⁵⁶⁶ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 45.

⁵⁶⁷ Boyce, 8.

⁵⁶⁸ Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, 199.

⁵⁶⁹ Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, 199.

⁵⁷⁰ Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Fingerprints of God: What Science Is Learning About the Brain and Spiritual Experience* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 122.

⁵⁷¹ Richard J. Davidson, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Jessica Schumacher, Melissa Rosenkranz, Daniel Muller, Saki F. Santorelli, Ferris Urbanowski, Anne Harrington, Katherine Bonus, John F. Sheridan, “Alterations in Brain and Immune Function Produced by Mindfulness Meditation,” *Psychosomatic Medicine* 65, no. 4 (July-Aug. 2003): 564-

reason, the left-prefrontal cortex is sometimes referred to as “the ‘happy’ part of the brain,” while the right prefrontal cortex has been referred to as “the anxious, worried section of the brain.”⁵⁷²

For purposes of reiterating and expanding on the previous cautionary note in relation to these descriptions of the brain, I note that some neuroscientists point out that references like the above to the prefrontal cortex and happiness may be “simplified to the point of distorting the truth.”⁵⁷³ These neuroscientists assert that these simplifications “may have some usefulness as a metaphor for how different types of brain function might interrelate, but [they] present a very limited mechanical view of the brain – which misses the dynamic quality of brain activity.”⁵⁷⁴ Circumspection is also warranted in relation to references to “positive emotions.” The above reference to “positive emotion” in relation to the left-prefrontal lobe comes from research using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), which classifies the following feelings as positive affect: interested, excited, strong, enthusiastic, proud, alert, inspired, determined, attentive, and active.⁵⁷⁵ Some researchers, like Neil McNaughton, point out the difficulty in defining emotion and the need for considering “physiological analysis” in efforts to do so.⁵⁷⁶ Instead of using the terms “positive emotion” and “negative emotion,” McNaughton tells us that emotions can be associated with certain biochemical clusters. Per health sciences professor Alane Daugherty, “Neil McNaughton in *Biology and Emotion* offers a biological approach to defining emotions and identifying clusters of emotional patterns that lead to specific reactions or

70, quoted in B. Allan Wallace, *Mind in the Balance: Meditation in Science, Buddhism, and Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 31.

⁵⁷² Hagerty, 186.

⁵⁷³ Boyce, 1.

⁵⁷⁴ Boyce, 11.

⁵⁷⁵ D. Watson, L.A. Clark, and A. Tellegen, “Development and Validation of Brief Measures of Positive and Negative Affect: The PANAS Scales,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54, no. 6 (1988): 1063-1070.

⁵⁷⁶ Neil McNaughton, *Biology and Emotion: Problems in the Behavioral Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 182.

general principles. In other words, which ones are life-generating and which ones are not.”⁵⁷⁷

Some scholars, especially those in the field of compassion and empathy, avoid the terms “positive emotion” and “negative emotion” because of the problematic nature of defining a positive emotion based on an immediate physical reaction, such as the release of oxytocin.

Compassion and empathy are affective states that create a reaction that is more complicated than the reaction usually associated with “positive emotions,” i.e., the biochemistry associated with a “positive emotion,” like the release of oxytocin, occurs later rather than immediately. Along these lines, rather than describing emotions as positive or negative, Dan Siegel defines emotion in terms of integration or lack of integration. Siegel associates emotional well-being with integration, flexibility, adaptability, while he associates rigidity and chaos with a lack of integration.⁵⁷⁸

To return to the subject of the primary parts of the human brain – the *occipital lobe* is the “region of the neocortex directly at the back of the brain” and is the “location of the primary visual cortex.”⁵⁷⁹ The *neocortex* (the outside layer of the brain) is associated with sight, hearing and thinking. The *parietal lobes* “help you perceive personal boundaries (where your body ends and the rest of the world begins).”⁵⁸⁰ Michael Persinger, a psychologist and researcher in the field of neuroscience and religion, described the brain’s left hemisphere as “associated with language ... and thus the sense of ‘self.’”⁵⁸¹ That said, we should be cautious of right-brain versus left-brain generalizations as “the brain’s hemispheres are highly interconnected and work

⁵⁷⁷ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 124, referring to Neil McNaughton, *Biology and Emotion: Problems in the Behavioral Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁵⁷⁸ Daniel J. Siegel, “Emotion as Integration: A Possible Answer to the Question, What is Emotion?” in *The Healing Power of Emotion: Affective Neuroscience, Development & Clinical Practice*, eds. Diana Fosha, Daniel J. Siegel and Marion F. Solomon (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 145-171.

⁵⁷⁹ Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, 201.

⁵⁸⁰ Hagerty, 122.

⁵⁸¹ Hagerty, 135.

together for complex processing.”⁵⁸² Persinger associated the *temporal lobe*, which is “involved with memory, emotions, and meaning, as well as hearing and language comprehension” with mystical experience – “the visual experiences, the hearing, knowing, vestibular [balance] effects, the smell.”⁵⁸³

Underneath the temporal lobes is the *limbic system*; the limbic system is the “subcortical group of brain structures particularly involved in emotional and nurturing behaviors;”⁵⁸⁴ it is between the brainstem and the cortex, and is associated with learning, motivation, memory, feelings/emotions, meaning, and the subconscious. The limbic system includes the amygdala, hippocampus, thalamus, hypothalamus, basal ganglia, and cingulate gyrus. The *hippocampus* carries cognitive memory; it is the “part of the limbic system particularly involved in the consolidation of episodic memories and memory for spatial locations.”⁵⁸⁵ The *anterior* (front) *cingulate* and the *cingulate gyrus* help us process our emotions and regulate our behavior, connecting our emotions with our cognitive and rational abilities, such as problem-solving; the anterior cingulate “acts as a kind of fulcrum that controls and balances the activity between the frontal lobes and limbic system.”⁵⁸⁶ In other words, when activity in the frontal lobes increases, activity in the limbic area decreases, and vice versa.⁵⁸⁷

Two small lobes, one on each side of the brain, *amygdalae*, are often referred to as the center of emotion; they have also been called the “seat of our subconscious.”⁵⁸⁸ While the amygdala certainly play a role in how we experience emotion, Saron points out that “locating all

⁵⁸² Boyce, 10.

⁵⁸³ Hagerty, 136.

⁵⁸⁴ Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, 200.

⁵⁸⁵ Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, 200.

⁵⁸⁶ Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist* (New York: Ballantine Books Trade Paperbacks, 2010), 125.

⁵⁸⁷ Newberg and Waldman, 49.

⁵⁸⁸ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 54.

emotion in the amygdala belies what we know about the powerful interconnectedness of the brain. Pictures of the anatomical connections of the amygdala to other parts of the brain ... show an incredibly dense level of interconnectivity with almost all parts of the cortex. Huge amounts of the brain are involved in even the simplest of tasks.”⁵⁸⁹ Psychophysiolgist Rollin McCraty sums up this interconnectedness as follows:

Several intriguing forms of interaction have been discovered that link the cognitive centers with the emotional processing areas of the brain. For example, bidirectional neural connections that exist between the frontal cortex and the amygdala permit emotion-related input from the amygdala to modulate cortical activity and cognitive input from the cortex to modulate the amygdala’s emotional information processing.

Beyond these hard-wired connections, biochemical bridges also link key components of the mental and emotional systems. The cortex, for instance, has been found to contain a high density of receptors for many neuropeptides that are also heavily concentrated in the brains’ subcortical areas, which are associated with emotional processing.⁵⁹⁰

Daugherty likens how the amygdalae function to an “archaic computer” that stores all of our experiences and perceptions with the emotional context of those experiences.⁵⁹¹ This function is inestimably important as it takes incoming information and filters it through stored experience, which is key in our emotional states. Everything we experience is filtered through the amygdala, and every experience is associated with anything that has “slightly resembled” it in the past, causing whatever emotional state is “consistent with that stored information.”⁵⁹² The hippocampus and the amygdala make meaning out of what we experience through this subconscious process. Every event we experience carries with it a biochemical reaction

⁵⁸⁹ Boyce, 3.

⁵⁹⁰ Rollin McCraty, “Heart-Brain Neurodynamics: The Making of Emotions” (Boulder Creek, California: Institute of HeartMath, 2003), 77, citing K. H. Pribram and D. McGuinness, “Arousal, Activation, and Effort in the Control of Attention,” *Psychological Review* 82, no. 2 (1975): 116-149; J. E. LeDoux, “Cognitive-emotional Interactions in the Brain,” in *The Nature of Emotion: Fundamental Questions*, eds. P. Ekman and R. J. Davidson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 216-223; J. LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York: Sim and Schuster, 1996); and C. B. Pert, H.E. Dreher, M.R. Ruff, “The Psychosomatic Network: Foundations of Mind-body Medicine,” *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine* 4 no. 4 (1998): 30-41.

⁵⁹¹ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 56.

⁵⁹² Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 55.

consistent with whatever past events resemble it; the *hypothalamus* and the *pituitary* produce the biochemicals associated with previous similar events; these biochemicals are sent throughout the body.

Our processing of experience and emotion, of comparing current external and internal experience to past experience, “results in changes in the patterns of descending autonomic activity flowing to the body. This leads to a wide variety of specific changes in biochemical outputs and biophysical states, such as alterations in patterns of muscle tension (especially in the face), adrenal secretions, vascular resistance, cardiac output, and heart rhythms.”⁵⁹³ The result of the amygdala’s processing of current experience through past experience is sent to the hypothalamus, which in turn releases the biochemicals associated with our two primary emotional systems – the *fear-response drive* and the *calm and connection drive*. The fear response system manages our response to perceived threats by sending us into fight, flight, or freeze mode. The calm and connection system moves us to pair bonding, social connections, and social groupings. When the amygdala interprets any experience as threatening in any way, that experience encodes into our neural networks as part of the fear response system. For example, when we feel threatened, the biochemical ACTH goes to the adrenal gland above the kidneys, the adrenals release epinephrine, norepinephrine, cortisol, etc., that flood the whole body and brain, which results in changes like our heart rate increasing, the liver releasing glucose, the pupils dilating, our digestion slowing, and our lungs expanding. When we feel social connection, the biochemical oxytocin is released (it is produced, among other places, in the stomach). This biochemical facilitates bonding in both men and women; it “calms the amygdala and reduces ACTH and cortisol, the two hormones primarily responsible for anxiety and stress.”⁵⁹⁴

⁵⁹³ McCraty, “Heart-Brain Neurodynamics,” 102.

⁵⁹⁴ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 143.

While both lobes of the amygdala are involved in the fear response system, only the right lobe is involved in the calm and connection system. Further, “our amygdala is only capable of resting in one drive at a time.”⁵⁹⁵ The initial response of the fear response system is pre-thought. This system is designed to preserve and maintain our lives. It functions in an immediate and overwhelming way to keep us safe. That said, we feel “hijacked” by emotions at times for good reason – the neural connections leading from the limbic part of the brain (associated with emotions) to the cortex (associated with rationality) are “stronger, quicker and more numerous”⁵⁹⁶ than those leading from the cortex to the limbic area, as if our emotional response highway is twice as wide and fast as our rational thought highway.

Heart Basics

The brain filters our experience and sends biochemical reactions throughout the body, including to the heart. The heart pumps blood throughout our bodies. The electrical impulse that causes the contraction of the heart’s beating “is estimated to be 60 times larger than the electrical impulse of the brain.”⁵⁹⁷ In addition to its blood pumping function, the heart “continually transmits dynamic patterns of neurological, hormonal, pressure, and electromagnetic information to the brain and throughout the body.”⁵⁹⁸ As an endocrine gland, the heart is also “responsible for secreting and receiving biochemicals that keep us functioning.”⁵⁹⁹ The heart reflects our experience in its electrical patterns, which are communicated back to the brain via the vagal

⁵⁹⁵ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 141, citing Rhawn Joseph, ed., *Neurotheology: Brain, Science, Spirituality, and Religious Experience* (San Jose: University Press, 2003).

⁵⁹⁶ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 13.

⁵⁹⁷ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 95.

⁵⁹⁸ McCraty, “Heart-Brain Neurodynamics,” 100, citing R. McCraty, M. Atkinson, *Psychophysiological Coherence* (Boulder Creek, CA: Heartmath Research Center, Institute of HeartMath, 2003), Publication 03-016.

⁵⁹⁹ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 95.

nerve. While biochemicals are sent throughout the body, the “electrical patterning of [the] heart profoundly impacts [our] emotional state at any given point in time.”⁶⁰⁰ In fact, the human heart sends more neural traffic to the brain than the brain sends to the heart.”⁶⁰¹ According to McCraty, amongst the “numerous sources of bodily input to the brain, the heart is given particular relevance in the emotional system due to its unique degree of afferent [ascending] input and its consistent generation of dynamic rhythmic patterns that are closely coupled with changes in emotional state.”⁶⁰² Further, the neural traffic from the heart to brain affects more than our emotions; it “can either inhibit or facilitate the brain’s activity, which, in turn, can affect perception and motor activity.”⁶⁰³ McCraty has the following to say on the topic: “Evidence now clearly demonstrates that afferent signals from the heart significantly influence cortical activity. Specifically, we now know that afferent messages from the cardiovascular system are not only relayed to the brain stem to exert homeostatic effects on cardiovascular regulation, but also have separate effects on aspects of higher perceptual activity and mental processing.”⁶⁰⁴

Surprisingly, research on transplanted hearts has indicated that, in a sense, the heart has its own brain: “The heart is, in fact, a highly complex information-processing center with its own functional brain, commonly called the *heart brain*, that communicates with and influences the cranial brain via the nervous system, hormonal system and other pathways. These influences affect brain function and most of the body’s major organs and play an important role in mental and emotional experience and the quality of our lives.”⁶⁰⁵ These findings emphasize the importance of the heart in our overall system. McCraty writes, “The heart is the primary and

⁶⁰⁰ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 79.

⁶⁰¹ McCraty, “Heart-Brain Neurodynamics,” 89-90.

⁶⁰² McCraty, “Heart-Brain Neurodynamics,” 102.

⁶⁰³ McCraty, “Heart-Brain Neurodynamics,” 92.

⁶⁰⁴ McCraty, “Heart-Brain Neurodynamics,” 94.

⁶⁰⁵ Rollin McCraty, *Science of the Heart: Exploring the Role of the Heart in Human Performance* Vol. 2 (Boulder Creek: Institute of Heart Math, 2015), 2.

most consistent source of dynamic rhythmic patterns in the body. Furthermore, the afferent networks connecting the heart and cardiovascular system with the brain are far more extensive than the afferent systems associated with other major organs.”⁶⁰⁶ Similarly, Daugherty writes, “Whether we ‘feel’ calm, or ‘feel’ chaotic it may be, in a large sense, due to the patterning of our heart.”⁶⁰⁷

Our biochemical makeup at any given point in time is largely responsible for how we feel, how we perceive and make sense of what is happening in the moment. As everything we feel carries its own biochemical footprint, our body reflects our subconscious beliefs. Thus, our hearts, brains, and biochemistry both create and reflect our experience.

Findings about physiological and emotional functions and spiritual practice

Neuroscientist Andrew Newberg is well known for his research on what happens in our brains when we engage in contemplative practice. While not everyone has embraced his research (some have even referred to it as “bad science”⁶⁰⁸), his conclusions are worth considering. For example, in his discussion of how we exercise compassion, Newberg makes the following claims:

When the amygdala becomes active, the anterior cingulate shuts down, which allows your reptilian brain to run the show.... On the other hand, if your frontal lobe becomes active, you stimulate the anterior cingulate, which slows down activity in the amygdala.... Thus it is essential that you nurture that inner negotiator, which is what meditation and spiritual practices do. They strengthen the frontal lobe – which stimulates the anterior cingulate – and this allows you to pursue your conscious goals in life with

⁶⁰⁶ McCraty, “Heart-Brain Neurodynamics,” 99.

⁶⁰⁷ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 97.

⁶⁰⁸ Richard H. Jones, “Limitations on the Neuroscientific Study of Mystical Experiences” *Zygon* 53 no.4 (December 2018), 996, referring to Edward F. Kelly and Michael Grosso, “Mystical Experience,” in *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* by Edward F. Kelly, Emily Williams Kelly, Adam Crabtree, Alan Gauld, Michael Grosso, and Bruce Greyson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), 475-495; and Richard P. Sloan, *Blind Faith: The Unholy Alliance of Religion and Medicine* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006).

greater purpose and serenity. A strong frontal-anterior cingulate circuit also inhibits anxiety, depression, and rage.⁶⁰⁹

Similarly, he asserts that contemplative practices “stimulate activity in the anterior cingulate, thus helping a person to become more sensitive to the feelings of others.”⁶¹⁰ Newberg points out that meditation seems to reduce activity in the amygdala, which is key in generating fear and anxiety,⁶¹¹ and states that meditation “simultaneously reduces stress while stimulating activity in the anterior cingulate, ... [which] supports our premise that spiritual practices enhance social awareness and compassion.”⁶¹²

Newberg summarizes his research related to what he calls our “‘God’ Circuits,” i.e., the “key neural structures and circuits that shape our perception of God,” as follows:

Occipital-parietal circuit	Identifies God as an object that exists in the world. Young children see God as a face because their brains cannot process abstract spiritual concepts.
Parietal-frontal circuit	Establishes a relationship between the two objects known as ‘you’ and ‘God.’ It places God in space and allows you to experience God’s presence. If you decrease activity in your parietal lobe through meditation or intense prayer, the boundaries between you and God dissolve. You feel a sense of unity with the object of contemplation and your spiritual beliefs.
Frontal lobe	Creates and integrates all of your ideas about God – positive or negative – including the logic you use to evaluate your religious and spiritual beliefs. It predicts your future in relationship to God and attempts to intellectually answer all the ‘why, what, and where’ questions raised by spiritual issues.
Thalamus	Gives emotional meaning to your concepts of God. The thalamus gives you a holistic sense of the world and appears to be the key organ that makes God feel objectively real.

⁶⁰⁹ Newberg and Waldman, 126.

⁶¹⁰ Newberg and Waldman, 53.

⁶¹¹ Newberg and Waldman, 50.

⁶¹² Newberg and Waldman, 125.

Amygdala	When overly stimulated, the amygdala creates the emotional impression of a frightening, authoritative, and punitive God, and it suppresses the frontal lobe's ability to logically think about God.
Striatum	Inhibits activity in the amygdala, allowing you to feel safe in the presence of God, or of whatever object or concept you are contemplating. [The striatum is a cluster of neurons in the basal ganglia involved in voluntary control of movement].
Anterior Cingulate	Allows you to experience God as loving and compassionate. It decreases religious anxiety, guilt, fear, and anger by suppressing activity in the amygdala. ⁶¹³

Newberg further relates our perception of God to neural structures and functions: "Our frontal lobes (the newest part of the human brain) provide us with a logical concept of a rational, deliberate, and loving God, while our limbic system (the oldest part of the brain) creates an emotionally meaningful experience of God."⁶¹⁴

In discussing what brain functions make us perceive God as real, Newberg writes the following:

We would argue that the more you meditate on a specific object – be it God, or peace, or financial success – the more active your thalamus becomes, until it reaches a point of stimulations where it perceives thoughts in the same way that other sensations are perceived. And if you exercise an idea over and over, your brain will begin to respond as though the idea was a real object in the world.... Thus, the more you focus on God, the more God will be sensed as real. But it will not be a 'symmetrical' reality. Instead, it will be perceived 'asymmetrically,' meaning that the reality will appear different from one's normal perception of the world. For advanced meditators, the asymmetric reality becomes their normal state of awareness. God, tranquility, and unity become an integral part of their lives, no longer a thought but a palpable experience, as real as the book you are holding in your hand.

The thalamus makes no distinction between inner and outer realities, and thus any idea, if contemplated long enough, will take on a semblance of reality. Your belief becomes

⁶¹³ Newberg and Waldman, 43.

⁶¹⁴ Newberg and Waldman, 49.

neurologically real, and your brain will respond accordingly. But for someone else, who has meditated on a different set of beliefs or goals, a different reality will seem true.⁶¹⁵

Newberg repeats this point that our experiences are varied, stating, “The data points to an endless variety of ways in which spiritual practices can affect the cognitive, emotional, and experiential processes of the brain, and each one of these experiences will lead to a different notion about God.”⁶¹⁶ In his discussion of the difference between child and adult brains and their respective conceptions of God, Newberg again emphasizes the uniqueness of our different perceptions:

We all begin with a simple neural circuit that captures our earliest impressions of God, and as we associate new meanings and qualities, these circuits interconnect, becoming larger and more complex over time. As brain-scan technology becomes more refined, I suspect we will see that each human being has a unique neural fingerprint that represents his or her image of God.⁶¹⁷

Mystics may find his conclusions regarding the experience of unity noteworthy. Newberg addresses how we experience unity in our brains, asserting that “when adults focus on complex ideas ... we neurologically disconnect from our visual orientation. This would allow God to lose his gender, face, and position in relationship to ourselves, and thus the boundaries ‘God’ and ‘self’ begin to blur or merge.... Mature frontal lobe processes are also responsible for the great imagination, creativity, and originality adults use when they attempt to describe the immaterial qualities of God.”⁶¹⁸ Newberg further describes the experience of spiritual unity as follows:

the occipital cortex, which is at the back of the brain, helps us to envision an anthropomorphic God, while the temporal lobes (situated above the ear but below the parietal area) allow some individuals to hear God’s voice.... when activity in the parietal area decreases, a sense of timelessness and spacelessness emerges. This allows the meditator to feel at one with the object of contemplation: with God, the universe, peacefulness, or any other object upon which he or she focuses.⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁵ Newberg and Waldman, 55.

⁶¹⁶ Newberg and Waldman, 60.

⁶¹⁷ Newberg and Waldman, 102.

⁶¹⁸ Newberg and Waldman, 90.

⁶¹⁹ Newberg and Waldman, 51-52.

Regarding a study in which Franciscan nuns engaged in Centering Prayer (the nuns “focused on God – on a word like *Jesus* or *Elohim* that helped them connect to the divine”)⁶²⁰ and Tibetan monks meditated, Newberg theorized that the nuns’ focus on God and the monks’ focus on “connecting with the underlying reality of life”⁶²¹ created an activation of the frontal lobes that prevented information going to the “orientation area” of the parietal lobes, so “you wind up with this sense of no self, no space, no time.”⁶²² In her exploration of neuroscience and spiritual experience, Barbara Bradley Hagerty contrasts the contemplative experience of the Franciscan nuns and Tibetan monks with Newberg’s research on the Pentecostal experience of speaking in tongues; with the speaking in tongues the opposite occurs, namely, the frontal lobes decrease in activity while the parietal lobes increase in activity.⁶²³

In her discussion of neuroscientific studies of Centering Prayer, Episcopalian priest and renowned author Cynthia Bourgeault summarizes conclusions about the brain activity associated with different types of contemplative practice as follows: concentrative practice, which she describes as “focused attention,” “tends to simulate the visual cortex and the parietal lobes, brain regions involved with focus, attention and visualization” while discursive meditation, described as “entail[ing] language, visualization, and vocalization,” engages “those areas of the brain controlling language (the frontal lobes).”⁶²⁴ She also reports that with discursive meditation “there is often an increase in external body movement, ranging from eye motion to actual gesticulation.”⁶²⁵ Neuroscientist Michael Spezio has the following to say about his research into Centering Prayer: “Our neuroscientific work supports the notion that during Centering Prayer we

⁶²⁰ Hagerty, 174.

⁶²¹ Hagerty, 172.

⁶²² Hagerty, 174-175.

⁶²³ Hagerty, 179.

⁶²⁴ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Heart of Centering Prayer: Nondual Christianity in Theory and Practice* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2016), 108-109.

⁶²⁵ Bourgeault, 108-109.

engage neural networks in the prefrontal and temporal lobes that have been linked to relational engagement.... Centering Prayer is not so much, then, about shutting areas of the brain down – and certainly it does not shut the frontal cortex down or off – but about up-regulating circuits for relational openness and engagement in a non-judgmental and non-discursive manner.”⁶²⁶

Newberg and mindfulness teacher Mark Waldman assert not only the uniqueness of our respective spiritual experiences (“the neurological literature makes it clear that every meditative experience is somewhat unique and stimulates different parts of the brain to different degrees”⁶²⁷), but also the uniqueness of our spiritual experiences in relation to our own experience. They indicate that their “neurological model suggest[s] that spiritual experiences simultaneously stimulate the sympathetic (arousing) and parasympathetic (calming) nervous systems. Generally speaking, it is rare that an experience both arouse and calms, which is one of the reasons why we think spiritual experiences stimulate the brain in a unique way. Our data demonstrates that spiritual experiences, when they occur, are feeling states, not abstract forms of intellectualism.”⁶²⁸

In his discussion of human memory and imagination, Hogue makes the case that understanding our psychophysiological functioning is important for understanding how we relate to ourselves, each other, and to God. He clarifies that memory may not function the way we think it does:

When we observe an event our brains divide the event into the senses we use to detect them. The brain then stores the visual information, for instance, in the occipital lobes of the brain. The sounds we hear lodge in the auditory cortex, and so on. The emotional responses we connect with certain events are housed in still other areas of the brain,

⁶²⁶ Michael Spezio, “Michael Spezio: Your Brain on Centering Prayer” (Handout received in Your Brain on God with Professor Andrew Dreitzer, Claremont, California, March 30, 2015), 1.

⁶²⁷ Newberg and Waldman, 51.

⁶²⁸ Newberg and Waldman, 75.

primarily within the limbic system and in the frontal lobes. When we recall that event ... the brain draws all that information back together to recreate our memory of the event.⁶²⁹

What Hogue is demonstrating here is that how the brain functions is important because it tells us that being at least somewhat skeptical of our memories may be warranted. Rather than ‘instant replays,’ our memories are ever-changing reconstructions: “Our brains actually re-construct our memories each time we recall them ... we never remember any event in exactly the same way twice.”⁶³⁰ In other words, remembering is actually “re-creating or re-imagining.”⁶³¹ Hogue connects this scientific understanding of how our brains function in relation to memory and imagination with our self-identity: “Since memories constitute the self, each time we remember an event from our lives, the self is transformed. The act of re-remembering is an act of self-reconstruction.”⁶³² This idea of self-reconstruction is a significant one because we are constantly engaged in remembering and recreating, and the process of remembering and recreating is constantly influenced by our present situation. As the brain processes thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations, i.e., the experience of the mind-heart-body, the reconstruction process means that our brain selects memories or imagines possibilities that match its present state; thus, feeling anxious yields memories and imaginings with anxiety, feeling calm yields memories and imaginings with calmness. Researcher Joan H. Hageman speaks to the ramifications of how we remember and recreate: “It may be argued that neural mechanisms provide a ‘container’ in which emotional memories can be encoded, retrieved, rehearsed, and re-encoded for spiritual formation and transformation (Hogue 2006, p. 231).”⁶³³

⁶²⁹ Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” 345-346.

⁶³⁰ Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” 346.

⁶³¹ Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” 346.

⁶³² Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” 347.

⁶³³ Joan H. Hageman, “Multicultural Religious and Spiritual Rituals: Meaning and Praxis” [Peer commentary on “Why Ritualized Behavior? Precaution Systems and Action Parsing in Developmental, Pathological and Cultural Rituals,” by Pascal Boyer and Pierre Lienard]. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 29 (2006): 595-650.

For Hogue, how the brain functions in relation to memory and imagination directly relates to the role of the individual Christian and the church. From his perspective, our brains are central to our religious experience as “the theatres where we sense, remember, and imagine ourselves as the body of Christ.”⁶³⁴ How memory functions is especially important to our experience. We each have “personal cellular programming” or memory consolidation – our subconscious carries what can be called implicit memory or “‘felt’ reaction”⁶³⁵ that physically mirrors our emotional experience – the more intense the emotional response, the more intense the physical one. Our *implicit memory* is the emotional and bodily response pattern formed deeply in the brain (not cognitive thought), as distinguished from an *autobiographical memory*, which is our conscious memory of an event. We make associations between our experiences and the emotions that accompanied them, and our neural networks recreate those emotional associations (*associative memory*). For example, a person whose molester took pictures of them may associate cameras with being violated, betrayed, shame, etc., while a person who associates pictures with fun times with friends may associate cameras with connection and validation.

One of the most significant findings in the field of social neuroscience regarding our emotional connections is that of a *mirror system*. Scientists discovered that some motor neurons in the brains of monkeys fire whether or not the monkey is actually performing an activity or observing that activity; in other words, these neurons “mimic the brain activity of actions observed.”⁶³⁶ Hogue reports that human brains also have mirror neurons that fire when we observe the goal of a behavior, hear the sound of a movement, or hear an action word. However, human mirroring does not stop there. Human brains observe and identify other people’s

⁶³⁴ Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, 186.

⁶³⁵ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 56.

⁶³⁶ Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” 348.

emotions: “The brain apparently tries on the observed facial expression and then interprets how the body feels when the face is similarly configured. This process is instantaneous and unconscious.”⁶³⁷ In other words, the human brain instantly and unconsciously “tries on” the emotions of the people with whom we come in contact; we are constantly and unconsciously connecting and relating to each other’s emotions.

Another significant finding about how our brains function is that of *neuroplasticity*, the “brain’s ability to ‘re-wire’ itself,”⁶³⁸ (also known as “cortical remapping.”⁶³⁹) The human brain is uniquely made up of “a nervous system that actively participates in its own neural construction,”⁶⁴⁰ in other words, “neurons do not have fixed properties. Instead they are changing all the time.”⁶⁴¹ Neuroplasticity refers to “the ability of neurons in the brain to change in response to experience.”⁶⁴² Our neural networks are constantly processing our experience. The more a network is used, the more it becomes part of how we perceive, think, and feel. That said, our brains “are malleable, or have the capability to change with new experience.... We not only see changes in the brains’ function, or physiology, meaning how it works momentarily, we also see changes in the brain’s anatomy. What this means is that you actually are changing the structure of your brain, and all its intricate workings, with new experience.”⁶⁴³ B. Alan Wallace points out that our neural circuits can and do rewire in response to “the external environment but also to internally generated states.”⁶⁴⁴

⁶³⁷ Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” 349.

⁶³⁸ Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” 352.

⁶³⁹ Hogue, “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Brain,” 259.

⁶⁴⁰ Newberg and Waldman, 104.

⁶⁴¹ Newberg and Waldman, 105.

⁶⁴² B. Allan Wallace, *Mind in the Balance: Meditation in Science, Buddhism, and Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 27.

⁶⁴³ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 47.

⁶⁴⁴ Wallace, 27.

Hogue references studies that reveal larger *hippocampus*'s in cab drivers and larger *motor cortex*'s in left-handed violin players to make the point that “experience—particularly repeated practice—changes our brains.”⁶⁴⁵ Hogue summarizes his conclusion: “The neurosciences have documented that human connections produce neurochemical changes in human bodies.... Human connections also help change the very structure of the brain.”⁶⁴⁶ The implication of neuroplasticity in relation to our memory is that we can replace implicit memories by cultivating new, and life-affirming experiences, whether real or in our imagination. Whether the experience is real or a vividly imagined one, new experience can and will yield new neural connections, new neural networks and new associative memories. Newberg and Mark Waldman synthesize their related findings as the following “neurological truths:”

- Your thoughts clearly affect the neurological functioning of your body.
- Optimism is essential for maintaining a healthy brain.
- Positive thoughts neurologically suppress negative thoughts.
- When you change the way you think, you begin to change your outward circumstances.
- Consciousness, reality, your mind, and your spiritual beliefs are profoundly interconnected and inseparable from the functioning of your brain.⁶⁴⁷

Hogue relates that the implications of these understandings related to mirror neurons and neuroplasticity are multitudinous. First, Hogue explains that we should congregate, we should pray, and we should honor the sacredness of human connection. For Hogue neuroscience teaches us that the brain processes involved in our relating to each other are also involved in our relating to God, and that theological reflection then teaches that human connection is sacred: “‘Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’ (Matthew 18:20).”⁶⁴⁸ Hogue also sees neuroscience as providing empirical evidence that “prayer changes brains ... theology

⁶⁴⁵ Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” 352.

⁶⁴⁶ Hogue, “Sometimes It Causes Me to Tremble: Fear, Faith, and the Human Brain,” 669.

⁶⁴⁷ Newberg and Waldman, 123.

⁶⁴⁸ Hogue, “Brain Matters: Neuroscience, Empathy, and Pastoral Theology,” 49.

names the sacredness of human intimacy. In those relational spaces we open ourselves in new ways to the divine, but the brain's social interdependence reminds us of the central role of face-to-face human contact. 'Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together' (Hebrews 10:25)."⁶⁴⁹

Second, Hogue posits that our religious communities can provide healing. Because of the neuroplasticity of our brains, "an ongoing sense of connectedness to others within a religious community will offer opportunities for lasting changes in the brain, restoring participants' capacities for work and love."⁶⁵⁰ Third, because our worship can be seen as an "experience of connectedness ... [and] an experience of extended empathy,"⁶⁵¹ we should love and care for each other. Hogue points out the obvious connection between mirror neurons and empathy, and extends this connection to include love. For Hogue, theology contributes to biology by telling us to love: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself' (Luke 10:27; cf. also Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30)."⁶⁵² Similarly, Hogue points to the Paul's instruction: "'If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind' (Philippians 2:1, 2)."⁶⁵³ Fourth, Hogue implies that not only should we love and care for each other, we should love and care for the rest of creation. Hogue writes, "We are 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139:14) ... practical theology prompts questions about the moral nature of our treatment of the rest of creation; as co-inhabitants of our planet, how ought we to be stewards of the world on which all life depends, and of life itself?"⁶⁵⁴

⁶⁴⁹ Hogue, "Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful," 352.

⁶⁵⁰ Hogue, "Sometimes It Causes Me to Tremble: Fear, Faith, and the Human Brain," 670.

⁶⁵¹ Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past*, 150-151.

⁶⁵² Hogue, "Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful," 353.

⁶⁵³ Hogue, "Brain Matters: Neuroscience, Empathy, and Pastoral Theology," 32.

⁶⁵⁴ Hogue, "Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful," 351.

Just as Hogue puts forward the significance of mirror neurons and neuroplasticity for human relating, he also puts forward the significance of mirror neurons and neuroplasticity in relation to narrative (story telling) and his ideas about how change occurs. Hogue points out that action sounds and verbal descriptions activate mirror neurons, and that listening to stories uses some of the same mirroring brain processes and structures. Referencing studies involving patients with severed connective neuronal tissue between their brain hemispheres (commonly referred to as ‘split-brain’),⁶⁵⁵ Hogue shares findings that the left hemisphere of the brain “constructs stories to make sense of what’s happening in the world.”⁶⁵⁶ For Hogue, this finding is significant because “our need for meaning is embedded in the biology of our own brains.”⁶⁵⁷ Hogue ties neuroscientific findings (the biologically embedded meaning-making story-creating function of the brain) with psychological findings (the brain’s natural process for “interpretation and selection—our brains ... automatically select and remember stories that represent the themes of life”).⁶⁵⁸ The importance of these neuroscientific understandings of meaning-making, story-creating, mirroring, and neuroplasticity also lies in the oft-cited discovery of Donald Hebb: ‘neurons that fire together wire together,’ which Hogue explains as “when neurons repeatedly or forcefully communicate with each other, they increase the odds that they will fire again.”⁶⁵⁹ In other words, “we are the stories we tell.”⁶⁶⁰

Similarly, Daugherty describes the physiological and emotional implications of mirror neurons, neuroplasticity, and the psychophysiology of the heart to advocate for “heartful

⁶⁵⁵ Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” 342, citing M. Gazzaniga, *The mind’s past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 23-27.

⁶⁵⁶ Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” 342.

⁶⁵⁷ Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” 343.

⁶⁵⁸ Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” 341, referring to the work of Dan McAdams, *Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: William Morrow, 1993).

⁶⁵⁹ Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” 341, referring to Donald O. Hebb, *The Organization of Behavior: A Neuropsychological Theory* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1949).

⁶⁶⁰ Hogue, “Brain Matters: Practicing Religion, Forming the Faithful,” 343.

awareness and engagement.” Daugherty relates the implications of these neuroscientific and psychophysiological findings of heartfulness, i.e., of “deep and profound” experience of connection within ourselves, with others, or with the “external world” as follows:

Our biochemicals are bathing the cells of our body in the hormones of connection, love and compassion, our brain is being activated to greater states of calm, clarity, and reduced stress, and our hearts are responding with a corresponding, coherent wavelength. And physiologically speaking, because what we continually experience, especially states that are deeply felt, become the way we function in the world; we begin to live this experience. The embodiment of heartfelt awareness calms our limbic, or emotional, system and creates body and brain integration that leads to a higher sense of wellbeing. Our nervous system changes regulatory mechanisms, and we begin to look at the whole of life through life generating, rather than life depleting emotional states.⁶⁶¹

Just as Hogue stresses the significance of neuroplasticity for the choices we make in how we relate to each other and to God, Daugherty emphasizes the significance of “heartful experience.” Daugherty notes that “we can ... intentionally engage and shift our heart wave pattern.”⁶⁶² Further, doing so consistently “reinforces existing neural pathways that the brain uses to control its input (self-manage) and facilitates the establishment of new control pathways, thus improving our ability to self-manage our emotions and regulate our physiological state.”⁶⁶³ As with neuroplasticity and our conscious attention to our thoughts, our conscious attention to engaging and shifting our heart wave pattern is similarly significant for the choices we make in how we relate to each other and to God. We can consciously use what we know about how the heart functions to shift from our fear-response drive to our calm and connection drive, and to strive to rest in our calm and connection drive as a means of deepening our relationship to ourselves, others, and to God, for “as our calm and connection system better allows us to connect

⁶⁶¹ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 20-21.

⁶⁶² Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 97.

⁶⁶³ McCraty, “Heart-Brain Neurodynamics,” 104.

to others, and the outside world, it also allows us to connect to the inexhaustible source of radiance, wisdom and power at our core.”⁶⁶⁴

Researching Spiritual Experience

In his discussion of the limits of neuroscientific study of mystical experience, Richard H. Jones posits that “identifying what is going on in the brain when a mystical experience occurs is one thing; what meditators actually experience is quite another. To study the former events is not to study the ‘lived’ experience itself – the felt sense of selflessness, unity, timelessness.”⁶⁶⁵ In other words, he opines that neuroscientists “study the state of the brain during an experience, not the experience itself.”⁶⁶⁶ Neurologist Patrick McNamara echoes this sentiment: “No scientist can say with certainty what happens during these moments [of religious experience].”⁶⁶⁷ Jones points out an “overlooked” facet of one of the Newberg and d’Aquili experiments – that the participants experienced unity differently: “The Christians experienced being ‘united with God’ and Buddhists experienced being ‘endless and intimately interwoven without everyone and everything the mind senses’ (Newberg et al. 2001, 6-7).”⁶⁶⁸ For Jones, this represents having “similar neurological readings” for “radically different experiences.”⁶⁶⁹ He concludes, “The possibility that the same neural base may ground different altered states of consciousness ... removes the possibility of a true ‘neuroscience of mystical consciousness.’”⁶⁷⁰

⁶⁶⁴ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 21.

⁶⁶⁵ Jones, 1000.

⁶⁶⁶ Jones, 1002.

⁶⁶⁷ Hagerty, 75.

⁶⁶⁸ Jones, 998.

⁶⁶⁹ Jones, 997.

⁶⁷⁰ Jones, 1008.

Scientific research into correlations between neurological occurrence and spiritual experience is known by a variety of terms, such as ‘spiritual neuroscience,’ ‘neuroscience of religion,’ or ‘neurotheology.’ Some scholars and researchers use the term ‘neurotheology’ as inclusive of other fields beyond neuroscience, including other disciplines that relate to the human experience of religion. Of the term Newberg writes, “It seems appropriate to allow for expanded use of the “neuro” component and the “theology” component. It would seem appropriate for neurotheology to refer to the totality of religions and religious experience as well as theology.”⁶⁷¹ Still others, such as Dreitcer, prefer the term “neurospirituality” because the use of “theology” suggests mental/interpretative reflection, which is quite a bit narrower than the field covers.”⁶⁷² Even so, much of the research in this field seems to favor the neuroscientific lens. Newberg, however, makes the point that neither neuroscience nor religion/theology should be privileged over the other: “Neuroscientific and theological perspectives must be considered to be comparable contributors to neurotheological investigations.”⁶⁷³ Thus, the meaning of a spiritual practice, its purpose, the religious concepts related to the practice, etc., should be given as much consideration as scientific data regarding physiological occurrence during the practice.

The neuroscientist, depending on her own personal beliefs and practices, may privilege the brain as “what processes all external and internal information into a coherent rendition of reality”⁶⁷⁴ in their research. Along these lines, Newberg writes that “the universal functions of the human brain offer a window into understanding religious beliefs in all human beings and cultures.”⁶⁷⁵ Correspondingly, he asserts that “neurological studies of specific types of religious

⁶⁷¹ Andrew Newberg, “Methodological Principles for Research in Neurotheology: Practical and Philosophical Implications” *NeuroQuantology* 4 (2010): 533.

⁶⁷² Andrew Dreitcer, email to author, October 9, 2020.

⁶⁷³ Newberg, “Methodological Principles,” 533.

⁶⁷⁴ Newberg, “Methodological Principles,” 534.

⁶⁷⁵ Newberg, “Methodological Principles,” 534.

phenomena help to.... advance our overall understanding of the human person and human health from both a biological as well as spiritual perspective.”⁶⁷⁶ At the same time, he concedes that “there is probably too much variability in normal human function to clearly differentiate the effectiveness and accuracy of certain beliefs or practices.”⁶⁷⁷ Further, he acknowledges the inability to ‘know’ what is happening in our spiritual experiences: “Since the brain cannot readily escape its own functioning, there is a fundamental uncertainty in all beliefs about reality.”⁶⁷⁸ Accordingly, he argues that “a combination of approaches is necessary to evaluate epistemological and ontological claims”⁶⁷⁹ and that “neurotheology should strive to support both practical and esoteric goals of scholarship and research.... allow[ing] for new methods, concepts, and conclusions to arise.”⁶⁸⁰ For Newberg, a new approach of this sort may need to bring together scientific perspectives with theological ones: “Such an approach may represent a ‘contemplative science’ in which scholars engage in both contemplative practices such as meditation and mysticism as well as empirical research found in the neurosciences. Several scholars have suggested this path may be necessary for a deeper understanding of human beings and the universe itself (Wallace, 2000; 2006).”⁶⁸¹

Lancaster makes a similar argument in touting the value of “first-person insights into immediate experience from those appropriately trained” and his assertion that “drawing on textual [i.e., the classic texts of the religious traditions], as well as phenomenological, sources is a critical dimension of the endeavor associated with neurophenomenology.”⁶⁸² That is to say, he

⁶⁷⁶ Newberg, “Methodological Principles,” 535.

⁶⁷⁷ Newberg, “Methodological Principles,” 541.

⁶⁷⁸ Newberg, “Methodological Principles,” 543.

⁶⁷⁹ Newberg, “Methodological Principles,” 543.

⁶⁸⁰ Newberg, “Methodological Principles,” 534.

⁶⁸¹ Newberg, “Methodological Principles,” 535, citing A. Wallace, *Contemplative Science: Where Buddhism and Neuroscience Converge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) and A. Wallace, *The Taboo of Subjectivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶⁸² Lancaster, 148.

proposes a “triadic approach incorporating hermeneutics, neuroscience and phenomenology.”⁶⁸³

Lancaster distinguishes his approach from that of “measuring the effects of spiritual practices.”⁶⁸⁴ Instead, he characterizes it as a “model-building stage of discovery,” which he calls an “endeavor [that] potentially benefits both sides of the divide—science may gain new hypotheses to be investigated; religion may find ways of reformulating its teachings and practices, thereby renewing our sense of the sacred.”⁶⁸⁵

Just as the neuroscientist may privilege neuroscience in her research, the theologian may privilege hermeneutics, the anthropologist ethnography, the philosopher phenomenology, and so forth, so too the mystic may privilege the heart in her research. Shaykh Al-Jamal Al-Rifa’i offers a perspective that privileges the heart:

The ability of the human being to attain gnosis exists in his heart, not in any of his [other] faculties. It is the heart that knows Allah and draws [ever] closer to Him. It is the heart that acts for Allah and seeks Him. The heart unveils what Allah contains and what the heart contains. The faculties are no more than followers, servants and instruments used by the heart in the same manner in which ... a caregiver cares for his people and a craftsman utilizes his tools.⁶⁸⁶

When Shaykh Al-Jamal Al-Rifa’i speaks of the heart in this manner, he is not referencing the physical organ; rather, he is referencing “the lordly spiritual subtlety that is within this physical heart.”⁶⁸⁷ As a reminder, Sufis believe in four ontological categories: the human plane, the supersensible plane, the plane of Divine compelling, and the plane of Divine unity. For the Sufi, the physical, visible world is only the first level of reality, which leaves three levels primarily unaddressed in most research (with the exception of the type of research Lancaster advocates for, though the possibility of “remembering unity” is brought up by Bourgeault in her discussion of

⁶⁸³ Lancaster, 149.

⁶⁸⁴ Lancaster, 166.

⁶⁸⁵ Lancaster, 166-167.

⁶⁸⁶ Shaykh Muhammad Sa’id al-Jamal al-Rifai, *Secrets of the Heart* (Canada: Sidi Muhammad Press, 2010), 7.

⁶⁸⁷ Al-Jamal al-Rifai, 10.

Spezio's research on Centering Prayer).⁶⁸⁸ At the same time, our spiritual experiences are embodied – what we do with our bodies does affect unseen realities. Accordingly, research focused on the heart and on heart-brain entrainment may present an entry point for our understanding of spiritual experience and realization of our creative potential. At the same time, these attempts constitute only a very small beginning.

Heart Rate Variability

The heart rate increases or decreases with every beat in accordance with our physical and emotional needs. Daugherty explains, “When our heart beats, it sends an electrical impulse throughout our body about 60 to 80 times per minute at rest.”⁶⁸⁹ In fact, the heart is “the most powerful generator of rhythmic information patterns in the human body.”⁶⁹⁰ The rhythm of our heart changes from beat to beat. This pattern of increasing or decreasing space between our heart beats is called our *heart rate variability* (HRV) or heart rhythm. HRV reflects the activity of the neural communication pathways between the heart and brain, and it can be measured and tracked, which is a focal point of the Institute of HeartMath's research. The Institute's Director of Research, Rollin McCraty, reports that “through experimenting with numerous physiological measures, we have found that heart rate variability (heart rhythm) patterns are consistently the most dynamic and reflective of changes in one's emotional state.”⁶⁹¹

Per McCraty, the heart's rhythmic patterns both reflect our emotions and influence our “moment-to-moment emotional perception and experience.”⁶⁹² McCraty indicates that “research

⁶⁸⁸ Bourgeault, 110.

⁶⁸⁹ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 96.

⁶⁹⁰ Institute of HeartMath, *Science of the Heart: Exploring the Role of the Heart in Human Performance* (Boulder Creek: Institute of Heart Math, 2001), Publication 01-001, 8.

⁶⁹¹ McCraty, “Heart-Brain Neurodynamics,” 80.

⁶⁹² McCraty, “Heart-Brain Neurodynamics,” 80.

suggests that the heart communicates relative to the emotional state (as reflected by patterns in heart rate variability) to the cardiac center of the brain stem (medulla), which in turn feeds into the intralaminar nuclei of the thalamus and the amygdala. These areas are directly connected to the base of the frontal lobes, which are critical for decision making and the integration of reason and feeling.”⁶⁹³ The electrical impulses of the heart reflect both our physical and emotional experience, and are communicated to the amygdala via the vagal nerve. The amygdala “responds in kind. If it senses a chaotic pattern it will release chaotic emotional states from deep within the brain, if it receives calm and coherent patterns it releases calm and coherent states. This is the feedback loop of emotional states. It also travels to the middle prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for mediating emotion, integrating and balancing brain function.”⁶⁹⁴ McCraty explains:

We now understand that simultaneous and complex changes in the patterns of the efferent [descending] activity in both the sympathetic and parasympathetic branches of the ANS [autonomic nervous system] are involved in the experience of different emotions. The sensations produced in any given emotional state depend on the extent to which sympathetic effects are balanced by parasympathetic influences; thus sympathetic/parasympathetic balance has become an important measure in psychophysiological research.⁶⁹⁵

The Institute offers the below summary of how HRV indicates autonomic function and physiological *coherence*:

- Thoughts and even subtle emotions influence the activity and balance of the autonomic nervous system (ANS).
- The ANS interacts with our digestive, cardiovascular, immune and hormonal systems.
- Negative reactions create disorder and imbalance in the ANS.
- Positive feelings such as appreciation create increased order and balance in the ANS, resulting in increased hormonal and immune system balance and more efficient brain function.⁶⁹⁶

⁶⁹³ Institute of HeartMath, 8.

⁶⁹⁴ Daugherty, *From Mindfulness*, 96, citing Daniel Siegel, *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation* (New York: Bantam, 2010).

⁶⁹⁵ McCraty, “Heart-Brain Neurodynamics,” 88.

⁶⁹⁶ Institute of HeartMath, 13.

Mystics, as well as many other spiritual seekers, strive for a deep coherence – a coherence of body, heart, mind, soul and spirit, of outer and inner, of essence with Essence. Because “the heart is uniquely positioned as a powerful entry point into the communication network that connects body, mind, emotions and spirit,”⁶⁹⁷ physiological coherence between our body, brain and heart may be representative of a ‘doorway’ to deep inner, spiritual coherence.

Physiological coherence is characterized by the following: “high heart-rhythm coherence (sine-wavelike rhythmic pattern); increased parasympathetic activity; increased entrainment and synchronization between physiological systems; and efficient and harmonious functioning of the cardiovascular, nervous, hormonal and immune systems.”⁶⁹⁸ On the topic of physiological coherence, McCraty offers this explanation: “Sustained positive emotions are associated with a noticeably coherent (i.e., ordered, smooth, and sine wave-like) heart rhythm pattern, whereas negative emotions are characterized by a jagged, erratic pattern in the heart’s rhythms.”⁶⁹⁹ The smooth and ordered (coherent) pattern “facilitates cortical function. This effect is often experienced as heightened mental clarity, improved decision making and increased creativity. Additionally, coherent input from the heart tends to facilitate the experience of positive feeling states.”⁷⁰⁰ The Institute also offers the following report on physiological coherence: “The latest research in neuroscience confirms that emotion and cognition can best be thought of as separate but interacting functions or systems, each with its unique intelligence. Our research is showing that the key to the successful integration of the mind and emotions lies in increasing the

⁶⁹⁷ Institute of HeartMath, 8.

⁶⁹⁸ McCraty, *Science*, 28.

⁶⁹⁹ McCraty, “Heart-Brain Neurodynamics,” 80, citing W. A. Tiller, R. McCraty, and M. Atkinson, “Cardiac Coherence: A New, Noninvasive Measure of Autonomic Nervous System Order,” *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine* 2, no. 1 (1996): 52-65.

⁷⁰⁰ Institute of HeartMath, 8.

coherence (ordered, harmonious function) in both systems and bringing them into phase with one another.”⁷⁰¹

McCraty asserts that when we experience mental and emotional coherence, i.e., “coherence within and between the mental and emotional systems, they interact constructively to expand awareness and permit optimal psychological and physiological functioning.”⁷⁰² This optimal psychological and physiological functioning is called *psychophysiological coherence*. This term refers to “states in which a high degree of order and harmony in the emotional domain translates as increased coherence in physiological patterns and processes.”⁷⁰³ This state is associated with the following: “sustained positive emotion; high degree of mental and emotional stability; constructive integration of the cognitive and emotional systems; increased synchronization and harmony between the cognitive, emotional and physiological systems.”⁷⁰⁴

The HeartMath Institute explains the value of researching heart rate variability as follows:

The normal variability in heart rate is due to the synergistic action of the two branches of the autonomic nervous system, which act in balance through neural, mechanical, humoral and other physiological mechanisms to maintain cardiovascular parameters in their optimal ranges and to permit appropriate reactions to changing external or internal conditions. In a healthy individual, thus, the heart rate estimated at any given time represents the net effect of the parasympathetic (vagus) nerves, which slow heart rate, and the sympathetic nerves, which accelerate it. These changes are influenced by emotions, thoughts and physical exercise. Our changing heart rhythms affect not only the heart but also the brain’s ability to process information.... They also directly affect how we feel. Thus, the study of heart rate variability is a powerful, objective and noninvasive tool to explore the dynamic interactions between physiological, mental, emotional and behavioral processes.”⁷⁰⁵

⁷⁰¹ Institute of HeartMath, 6.

⁷⁰² McCraty, “Heart-Brain Neurodynamics,” 79.

⁷⁰³ Institute of HeartMath, 13.

⁷⁰⁴ Institute of HeartMath, 17.

⁷⁰⁵ Institute of HeartMath, 13.

As for a more specific idea of what is measured in this research, the Institute provides this description:

The mathematical transformation (Fast Fourier Transform) of HRV data into power spectral density (PSD) is used to discriminate and quantify sympathetic and parasympathetic activity and total autonomic nervous system activity. Power spectral analysis reduces the HRV signal into its constituent frequency components and quantifies the relative power of these components. The power spectrum is divided into three main frequency ranges. The very low frequency range (VLF) (0.0033 to 0.04Hz) representing slower changes in heart rate, is an index of sympathetic activity, while power in the high frequency range (HF) (0.15 to 0.4Hz), representing quicker changes in heart rate, is primarily due to parasympathetic activity. The frequency range around the 0.1Hz region is called the low frequency (LF) band and is also often referred to as the baroreceptor band, because it reflects the blood pressure feedback signals sent from the heart back to the brain, which also affect the HRV waveform. The LF band is more complex, as it can reflect a mixture of sympathetic and parasympathetic activity.⁷⁰⁶

McCraty reports that a variety of studies have linked HRV to several factors of well-being, such as emotional regulation, self-directedness, and coping. He also cautions that while emotional self-regulation, autogenic training, and some meditation techniques have been found to increase HRV coherence, not all meditation or prayer styles do so. Nonetheless, a study of the effect of five types of prayer on HRV “found that all types of prayer elicited increased cardiac coherence.”⁷⁰⁷

Bourgeault lauds the Institute’s research endeavors, asserting that its researchers have “a far better intuitive grasp of the terrain delineated by prayer of the heart and the Christian kenotic approach to nonduality than does the still Buddhist-dominated field of academic neuroscience.”⁷⁰⁸ At the same time, she notes that “for HeartMath’s initial groundbreaking discoveries to gain widespread scientific credibility, the research would most likely need to be independently replicated within established academic research laboratories following standard

⁷⁰⁶ Institute of HeartMath, 13-14.

⁷⁰⁷ McCraty, *Science*, 35.

⁷⁰⁸ Bourgeault, 114.

research protocols.”⁷⁰⁹ Bourgeault also makes note of neuroscientist Michael Spezio’s assertion that fully conducting such research would require “simultaneously synchronized, high-resolution fMRI of both the heart and the brain together,” and that few labs even have this capacity.⁷¹⁰

Conclusion

Mindfulness teacher Barry Boyce wrote, “What we feel we know today will be eclipsed by findings after our lifetime.”⁷¹¹ Boyce’s statement reminds us of the limits of our current understanding. Despite its limitations, our understanding still conveys something meaningful and instructive for how we live our lives. Developmental biologist Bruce H. Lipton wrote, “The evidence that belief exerts a powerful influence over physiology, gene expression, and behavior has led epigeneticist Cole to conclude: ‘To an extent that immunologists and psychologists rarely appreciate, we are architects of our own experience. Your subjective experience carries more power than your objective situation.’ (Dobbs 2013)”⁷¹²

Not only do our beliefs make us architects of our own experience, the signs within our physiology and psychophysiology make us architects of our own experience. As our spiritual experiences are feeling states, we are invited to consciously cultivate them, and by doing so, to create an inner architecture that is life-affirming. These signs invite us to an individual and collective responsibility to cultivate loving and affirming re-membering and re-imagining, to individually and collectively participate actively in re-creating and re-imagining our lives in positive ways. We are invited to Daugherty’s “heartfulness” and Abu Nasr al-Sarraj’s “presence

⁷⁰⁹ Bourgeault, 114.

⁷¹⁰ Bourgeault, 114.

⁷¹¹ Boyce, 1.

⁷¹² Bruce H. Lipton, *The Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Matter & Miracles*. (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2016).

of heart.” We are invited to take an active role in our own spiritual experience – in creating our perception of God, in creating our understanding of God, in creating how we share God’s message, and in sharing the stories of our experience of God. What Qur’ānic and Biblical stories we tell and how we tell them contribute to our understanding of God and our sharing of God’s message as loving, embracing and forgiving, or as wrathful and rejecting. We have a responsibility to cultivate unitive spiritual practices, spiritual practices that foster peace and love within ourselves in a way that accords with our theology. The conclusions from neuroscience and psychophysiological research mentioned above imply that we can and should become more actively engaged in self-management, i.e., managing our own mind-body-heart-soul system, by consciously choosing to give our time, energy, and attention to that which is loving, embracing and affirming. Knowing that we can choose to consciously be a part of the process of generating new brain cells and new synaptic connections, as well as of generating physiological, psychophysiological and spiritual coherence – is to be invited to live with heightened self-awareness, other-awareness, and overall responsibility. Taken together, these signs indicate that God is inviting us to participate in the ongoing process of creating our lives in the image of the God we believe in.

Chapter 6

Beginning the Inquiry

Introduction

To better understand how we might be architects of our own feeling states and spiritual experiences, we can turn to the experience of others. Learning about others' experience often teaches us more about ourselves, our relationships with each other, and our relationships with God. To that end, I am especially interested in hearing others tell the stories of their spiritual lives. These stories, with the context of our overview of the spiritualities, practices, and related neuroscience and psychophysiology, lay the groundwork for research aimed toward answering questions about engaging sacred text through obtaining physiological data as well as through what others relate about their emotional and spiritual experience. Exploring what the research participants' relate about their experience affirms for me that no area of research should be privileged over another; that what others relate about their experience is just as important if not more so than what EEG, fMRI, or HRV data reveals about that experience; and that each story has instructive value. As humans we should care about each other enough to listen to and learn from each other's stories, and to have our perspectives shifted by them.

Methods and Methodology

I recruited two adult participants who gave informed consent for their participation. The participant who identified as Muslim engaged in Qur'ānic recitation of *Sūrah Yā Sīn* (Chapter 36) and the participant who identified as Christian engaged in *Lectio Divina*. For the Qur'ānic reciter, I solicited a volunteer via posting to Shadhiliyya Sufi groups; the participant was selected solely based on the timeliness of her response indicating willingness to participate in the study.

For the *lectio* practitioner, I solicited a volunteer from the Claremont School of Theology student body; the participant was selected based on being the only responder who indicated she regularly engaged in *lectio*. After each reading/recitation state, the participant completed a spiritual experience and emotional state questionnaire. For purposes of this inquiry, I explored the differences in the intra-individual measurements for the above states rather than comparing the participants to each other. In other words, I sought not to compare the participants to each other; rather, I sought to understand the participants' individual experience of engaging sacred text.

To do so, I interviewed each participant with questions related to their experience of their usual sacred text practice, how they define spirituality, the spiritual capacities they engage in their practice, what the practice has taught them about themselves and about God, and anything else they thought was important to share in relation to their experience engaging sacred text as a spiritual formation practice (see Appendix). Each participant was interviewed individually to gain an understanding of the participant's experience of their sacred text practice, exploring their intention for the practice and their description of their experience in their own language. Because I did not find an emotions or spiritual experience questionnaire that seemed both comprehensive and inclusive of varied spiritual experiences in varied spiritual traditions, I developed a spiritual experience and emotional state questionnaire that I hoped would reflect a fuller picture of the participants' emotional and spiritual experience (see Appendix).

Participant 1 Interview

The first interviewee is a white female in her sixties. She described her parents and family as “sort of lapsed Christians.”⁷¹³ She later identified as an atheist for many years before experiencing a spiritual awakening on the subway:

All of a sudden, really out of the blue, I felt a gentle warmth at the top of my head and a sense of connectedness to everything. I remember looking around at the folks on the subway car and feeling a kind of fellowship with them, though of course I didn't know them per se. It seemed there was a special light in the air, and I felt a gentle buoyancy and hope. I recognized right away what had happened.... Of course, I have my ups and downs but I've never doubted or looked back. How could the river doubt the sea? It rushes towards it with all its being.⁷¹⁴

Participant 1 “took hand with Sidi [Shaykh al-Jamal al-Rifa’i]” in 2000 and now identifies herself as a Sufi and Muslim. Participant 1 described spirituality as “the essence of who and what I am. It implies the connection between me and God, and God is how I got here, so how could it be any different? It's also the connection or way/impulse to keep seeking out and renewing and deepening that connection.”⁷¹⁵ Her favorite spiritual practice is remembrance.

The spiritual practice engaging sacred text that is most important to her is Qur’ānic recitation, which she does daily as a dedicated practice. In the last year she has been reciting a one-fourth to one-half of a *hizb* (1/60th of the Qur’ān) daily. She also recites Qur’ān throughout the day in various circumstances, like when she is having a difficult conversation, starting a meeting, or feels like she needs protection. In addition, she recites Qur’ān during Ramadan, *khalwas*, and Muslim holidays. She reported that before she started reciting progressively through the entire Qur’ān each day, she had recited *Sūrah Yā Sīn* (Chapter 36) for years and had

⁷¹³ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 2.

⁷¹⁴ Participant 1, E-mail message to author, September 23, 2020.

⁷¹⁵ Participant 1, E-mail message to author, September 23, 2020.

memorized it. Of *Sūrah Yā Sīn*, she said, “*Yā Sīn* is still very much with me - phrases float through my mind and dreams on a regular basis, and thoughts associated with it.”⁷¹⁶

Her first introduction to Qur’ānic recitation occurred about thirty years ago when a limousine driver was playing the Qur’ān; she related the following of her emotional reaction to hearing the Qur’ān for the first time: “He was playing Qur’ān, and I wanted to cry and I sat up and said, “What is that? It’s amazing,” and he said, “Qur’ān,” and I said, “Oh my gosh, I had no idea.” And he popped it out and gave it to me at the end of the ride, and I still have it somewhere.”⁷¹⁷ She first began memorizing and reciting short verses from the Qur’ān in 2000 for the purpose of performing the ritual Islamic prayer. She began studying Arabic and Qur’ānic recitation in 2004. Participant 1 described both ideological reasons and personal motivation for reciting Qur’ān:

Personally, I do it because it saves me from my inner demons.... I recite Qur’ān because it eases anxiety, it brings relief and inspiration. I mean, it’s very practical. I believe the longing in my heart comes from being a Muslim, but I also do it because it really saves me from myself ... I have an absolutely crappy day if I don’t recite Qur’ān during the time between when *Fajr* [the dawn prayer] comes in and when *Fajr* goes out ... I just have an absolutely lousy day. I’m just miserable and anxious and testy.”⁷¹⁸

She further described the primacy of Qur’ānic recitation in her life: “It’s firmly a part of the practices that I do that mean everything to me ... that express my love for Allah, which is maybe the most important – it is the most important thing – to me. So it is a cornerstone, it’s also salat and the five pillars ... but it’s foundational to who I am and what I do and how I do it. And it makes me a better person in who I am and what I do and how I do it.”⁷¹⁹

⁷¹⁶ Participant 1, E-mail message to author, July 4, 2020.

⁷¹⁷ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 1.

⁷¹⁸ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 4.

⁷¹⁹ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 12.

When asked her to describe her experience of Qur’ānic recitation, Participant 1 described a rich emotional, spiritual, and physical experience: “I have always felt inspired and lifted and opened and put into a transcendent, sacred place. I have also always felt, at times, nauseous or triggered or strong emotions coming up like anger or unease.”⁷²⁰ She also reported feeling the following: “I feel relief, I feel profoundly protected. I feel inspired.”⁷²¹ In relation to her physical experience, Participant 1 related an embodied delight: “Sometimes I feel certain parts of my body are more aware than other parts ... I feel energy flow, I feel ... a whole higher octave of pleasure, and it feels like it can open that – ecstasy and pleasure. Physical pleasure.”⁷²² This participant repeatedly related that the spiritual capacity for emotions (feelings) is a large part of her spiritual experience of Qur’ānic recitation:

Often gratitude. Sometimes awe, like the immensity of Allah and the ephemerality and vulnerability and complete dependence of me. Sometimes it brings up ... the feeling of overwhelm, like, “Oh my gosh, the Generosity of Allah is so enormous, there’s no way I can take this all in.” It brings up love. I’m usually, often, maybe usually feel more loving after I’ve recited, more compassionate, more peaceful. But during recitation, it can bring up annoyance, anger ... sometimes it brings up despair, and I’m like, “Okay, that’s just moving through,” you know, I have to catch myself. Contentment... Generosity. Humility. Irritation ... Sometimes unworthiness, like, “Boy, I sure don’t measure up to this.” And again, I often catch myself and go, “Well, Allah is showing you what’s possible, and you’re probably being stretched right now. Desire to do better and be better. Frustration. Connectedness with people and with creation. Compassion.”⁷²³

As is shown in the above, her approach to the thoughts and feelings that emerge during the practice reveals the spiritual capacities of awareness and attention, as does the following statement: “Oh [referring to herself by name], you’re mind’s wandering, come back.”⁷²⁴ The above description of her emotional experience also reveals the stance of noticing and clearing

⁷²⁰ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 3.

⁷²¹ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 5.

⁷²² Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 5.

⁷²³ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 9-10.

⁷²⁴ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 5.

through trusting that God is transforming the triggering thought or feeling: “And I’ve learned that it passes. I just keep reciting and it eventually passes. I have since learned that it’s cleaning something in me.”⁷²⁵

The way Participant 1 speaks of her experience of the transformative power of reciting Qur’ān is reminiscent of O’Donnell’s statement that *lectio* leads to “personal liberation and transformation.” Participant 1 made repeated references to the transformative power of the recitation, as in the following: “It’s cleaning your ego or whatever it is.”⁷²⁶ She also related this noticing-clearing-releasing stance with the following: “I’m like, ‘Okay, Allah (*subhanahu wa-ta’ala*) [Glory and Praise to God] is cleaning me.’ And I just turn my attention back to Allah, or I just ask Allah to clean it, or take it or whatever. And, generally, I move through it. And, it’s really noticeable. A lot of times, I would just get a really strong feeling of nausea, and I’m like ... ‘bismillah,’ and then I always move through it.”⁷²⁷ Without prompting, Participant 1 noted that this experience of resolution occurs when she is reciting in Arabic and that she does not experience this same resolution when reading an English interpretation. Of her experience reading the Qur’ān in English, she reported: “I completely trust my own recitation [in Arabic]. The English when you, you know what it’s like, when you read five different translations, you get five sometimes very different nuances, and not nuances but things ... there’s enough truth in it I guess. If I had to choose one or the other, I would choose just the Arabic.”⁷²⁸ Participant 1 further expressed her experience of “personal liberation and transformation as follows: “[reciting Qur’ān] means to me that God, Allah, wants us to be empowered – in that the Qur’ān, reciting

⁷²⁵ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 3.

⁷²⁶ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 8.

⁷²⁷ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 11.

⁷²⁸ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 13.

Qur'ān, can be a very powerful healing for physical, mental, emotional and spiritual things.”⁷²⁹

At this point she went on to tell a story of the miraculous healing her dog experienced from a life-threatening kidney infection after she recited *surahs* (chapters of the Qur'ān) “over and over in his ear.”⁷³⁰ Not only did Participant 1 relate her experience of miraculous healing through the Qur'ān, she also related her remarkable experience of it being life-changing on a more regular basis: “It puts me on a magic carpet all day.”⁷³¹ Later in the interview she repeated this point: “If I’m sitting down with the Qur'ān and reciting I would say the magic carpet feeling of feeling safe and protected and coasting pretty much stays with me all day.”⁷³²

In relation to the spiritual capacity for intention, Participant 1 related that sometimes her intention is specific and sometimes it is general: “I think if you’re showing up for it [Qur’ānic recitation], it shows some kind of intention and Allah knows that – that’s my experience of it. But I do think intention does affect the experience of it for sure, and I feel blessed that one can make that choice of intention and have it affect the experience.”⁷³³ In relation to the Qur'ān’s transformative impact and the spiritual capacity for imagination, she related that the “Qur’ān really walks you, and it opens ... the realm of imagination.”⁷³⁴ She is referring here to the suprasensible plane – the realm between the material world and the spiritual realm of divine compelling; this plane is the realm of thoughts, dreams, and the beginning of actions. Participant 1 also referenced that during her recitation she sometimes uses the capacity for imagination much like imagination is used in St. Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, i.e., by putting oneself into the scene depicted in the text.

⁷²⁹ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 5.

⁷³⁰ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 6.

⁷³¹ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 4.

⁷³² Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 13.

⁷³³ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 8.

⁷³⁴ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 10.

The spiritual capacity seemingly most prevalent in Qur'ānic recitation for Participant 1 is relationality – in the intention to grow in closeness to Allah and the experience of God's love and care:

I feel like more and more, I feel like it is a love letter written specifically to me as well as to humanity as well as to everybody who cares to listen. At times, I remember when I was reciting from the transliteration for some people ... it was during Ramadan, and I was fasting, and I was really tired, and I asked [Allah] for help and got, insha'Allah, a fragrance of Jibril [the angel Gabriel] (may Allah be pleased with him) like standing right by me helping me ... And I was like, "Me? Why would Jibril come and help me?" I'm just me. I'm not a prophet, I'm not a saint, I'm just fumbling through this transliteration but I felt like it was very clear that I was receiving help to bring it to the people I was reciting it for.⁷³⁵

She further described her experience of God's love through the recitation as follows: "I think it strengthens my relationship with God because it's a – syllable by syllable, phoneme by phoneme – reminder that this is a love letter,"⁷³⁶ and "it means to me that God loves me enough to have given me, opened Islam to me, and given me a love for this practice – it's kind of a testimony of how much God really tenderly loves me, and anybody, obviously, who's called to this, but it feels very personal."⁷³⁷ She also related her experience of receiving the message of a verse, saying that "it feels like it drops home."⁷³⁸ Participant 1 also experiences the capacity for relationality in her recitation as an improvement in her relationship with herself and others: "It helps me feel better about myself ... It helps me relate better to people often."⁷³⁹ She related that the recitation helps remind her of the sacredness that God has put in the human being, and helps her honor her own innate purity: "I feel like I'm putting myself where I belong. I'm sitting with the family of the prophets. I'm honoring my origins as a manifestation of the first human being

⁷³⁵ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 3.

⁷³⁶ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 9.

⁷³⁷ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 5.

⁷³⁸ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 9.

⁷³⁹ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 9.

who was a prophet, Adam – my own holiness, my original *fitra* [innate purity], who I truly am.”⁷⁴⁰

In relation to the capacity for meaning-making, i.e., the spiritual significance attributed to the phenomena of the practice and the conceptualizations that underly those attributions, Participant 1 related that reciting Qur’ān has helped her understand “that the *jalal* [manifestations of God’s majesty that we experience as severe] is also ordained. The *jamal* [manifestations of God’s beauty that we experience as grace and gentleness] and the *jalal* are both Allah being a hidden treasure and wanting to be known.”⁷⁴¹ Her experience of recitation reveals the preeminent regard she has for the Qur’ān and the meaning she associates with it:

I forget where the saying comes from that there are three holy books, you know there’s the Qur’ān, there’s the human heart, and there’s the creation, it’s the same holy book it’s just three different ways of showing up. I love that because when I was a raving atheist, when I was a little kid, my heart got broken for whatever it got broken about. And I loved nature. I loved lightning and thunder. I loved the ocean. I loved trees. I loved animals. I mean – it was like I beheld something in nature – I didn’t realize that’s what I was doing then, but it was always the Qur’ān. I mean, the Qur’ān is just another manifestation of the heart of Allah essentially. So ...it’s the same thing with other holy books, it’s the same thing ... I would say that the Qur’ān is the holy book that is the essence of all the holy books and that the human heart and the creation are all just different ways of the same thing showing up. And I love that.⁷⁴²

She further described the pervasiveness of her experience of the Qur’ān as the same holy book as the created world:

I would go down and listen to the bees first thing in the morning when they start being active, and it sounded like they were reciting the Qur’ān – the buzzing of the bees. And then pretty much everything starts to sound like the Qur’ān – the wind in the trees and the water over the brook and the barking of the dogs ... you can hear the cells vibrating in the plants and then everything all of the sudden sounds like the Qur’ān ... more and more. The stew that I cook with love. Everything. Even the ugly things. The vibrations of the oily concrete in the cities – all that. It’s still Qur’ān at a denser level.”⁷⁴³

⁷⁴⁰ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 5.

⁷⁴¹ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 12.

⁷⁴² Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 14.

⁷⁴³ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 3.

Participant 1's remarks also evoke Casey's description of unity with "all the whole creation" as an outcome of *contemplatio*:

I feel like I'm adding to the light in the world when I recite the Qur'ān. It is a light ... it adds to the blessings in the world, it brings in a higher light into the world, it's a way of bringing healing to the world. There's no question in my mind that things of a very pure vibration affect where they come, and so I believe it affects the room I'm sitting in and the people in the house and the believing *jinn* [spirits who are lower in rank than angels that can be either benevolent or malevolent], I assume they're around me, and the animals and plants and everything on my property. And I believe it [the light and vibration] goes out in sphere after sphere after sphere. I think it adds – it adds to the goodness in the world.”⁷⁴⁴

Participant 1's Emotional and Spiritual Experience Reciting *Sūrah Yā Sūn* of the Holy Qur'ān (in Arabic)

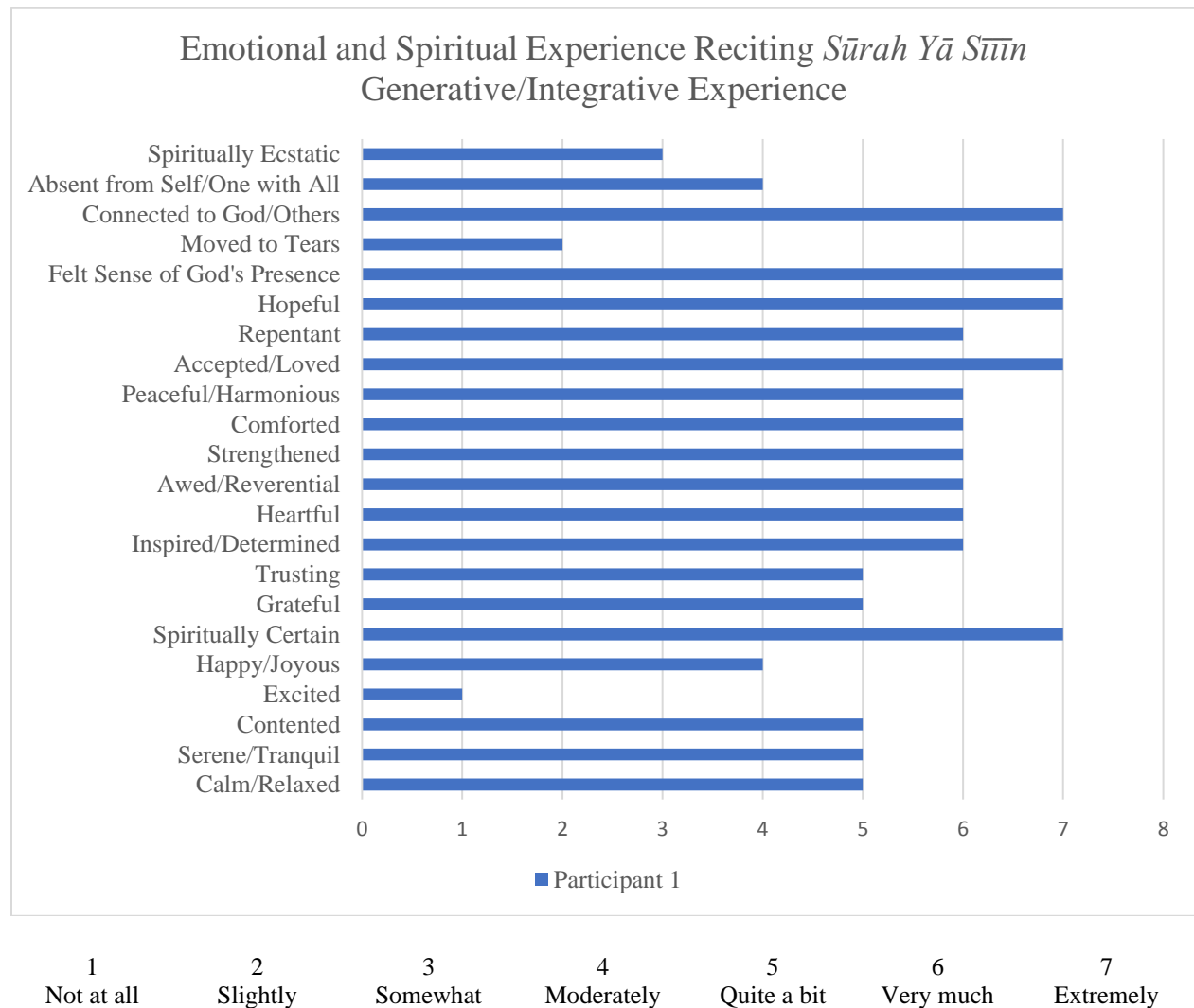
Emotional and spiritual experience was measured with 37 questions – 22 questions for generative/integrative experience and 15 for non-generative/integrative experience. I did not attempt to separate emotional experience from spiritual experience questions because I believe them to be intertwined. As we saw in the role of fear and hope in Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī's spirituality, emotions often play a pivotal role in our spiritual experience. Some emotions may initially be non-generative/integrative, like empathy, but quickly become generative/integrative, like compassion, if processed in a generative/integrative way. For example, if a worshipper experiences regret during a practice and continues with the practice, the biochemical impact of the initial feeling may change from a fear-dominated system to a calm-and-connection-dominated system. The worshipper's emotional transformation during the practice goes hand in hand with the experience of spiritual transformation.

The base for each question was the same for all 37 questions – “During this stage, to what extent did you feel/experience the following on a scale of 1 to 7 (1 being not at all, 2 being

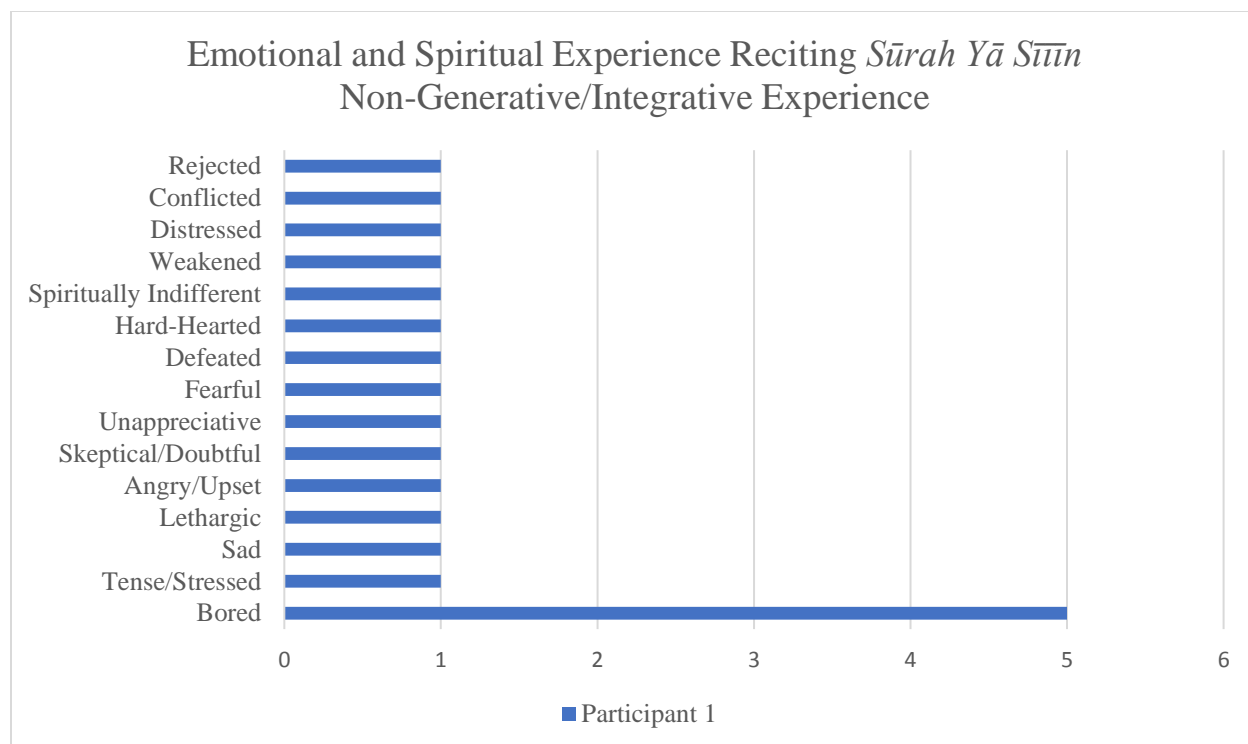
⁷⁴⁴ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 5.

slightly, 3 being somewhat, 4 being moderately, 5 being quite a bit, 6 being very much, and 7 being extremely)." The following questions and responses are depicted in the charts below. The first question was Bored; Participant 1's response for this item was 5. The second was Calm/Relaxed; the response was 5. The third was Tense/Stressed; the response was 1. The fourth was Serene/Tranquil; the response was 5. The fifth was Sad; the response was 1. The sixth was Contented; the response was 5. The seventh was Lethargic; the response was 1. The eighth was Excited; the response was 1. The ninth was Angry/Upset; the response was 1. The tenth was Happy/Joyous; the response was 4. The eleventh was Skeptical/Doubtful; the response was 1. The twelfth was Spiritually Certain; the response was 7. The thirteenth was Unappreciative; the response was 1. The fourteenth was Grateful; the response was 5. The fifteenth was Fearful; the response was 1. The sixteenth was Trusting; the response was 5. The seventeenth was Defeated; the response was 1. The eighteenth was Inspired/Determined; the response was 6. The nineteenth was Hard-Hearted (Constricted, Closed Off); the response was 1. The twentieth was Heartful (Heart Softening or 'Opening'); the response was 6. The twenty-first was Spiritually Indifferent; the response was 1. The twenty-second was Awed/Reverential; the response was 6. The twenty-third was Weakened; the response was 1. The twenty-fourth was Strengthened; the response was 6. The twenty-fifth was Distressed; the response was 1. The twenty-sixth was Comforted; the response was 6. The twenty-seventh was Conflicted; the response was 1. The twenty-eighth was Peaceful/Harmonious; the response was 6. The twenty-ninth was Rejected; the response was 1. The thirtieth was Accepted/Loved; the response was 7. The thirty-first was Repentant; the response was 6. The thirty-second was Hopeful; the response was 7. The thirty-third was Felt Sense of God's Presence/Help/Guidance; the response was 7. The thirty-fourth was Moved to Tears; the response was 2. The thirty-fifth was Connected to God/Others; the response was 7.

The thirty-sixth was Absent from Self/One with All of Life; the response was 4. The thirty-seventh was Spiritually Ecstatic; the response was 3.



The mean response for generative/integrative emotional and spiritual experience was 5.27.



1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Not at all Slightly Somewhat Moderately Quite a bit Very much Extremely

The mean response for non-generative/integrative experience was 1.3.

As with the participant's response to Accepted/Loved with a 7, i.e., extremely, and with her response to Connected to God/Others with a 7, these responses in aggregate corroborate the participant's description of her experience of Qur'ānic recitation in the interview. While she does experience some unpleasant physical sensations and emotions, those are transformed through the practice; her overall experience is generative and spiritually fulfilling. She described her experience of reciting *Sūrah Yā Sīn* as follows: "It feels like an old friend. It does make parts of me that are not in complete alignment uneasy, but I welcome that and understand it. Occasionally I get nauseated when reciting Qur'ān and I think it's part of the cleaning process. I

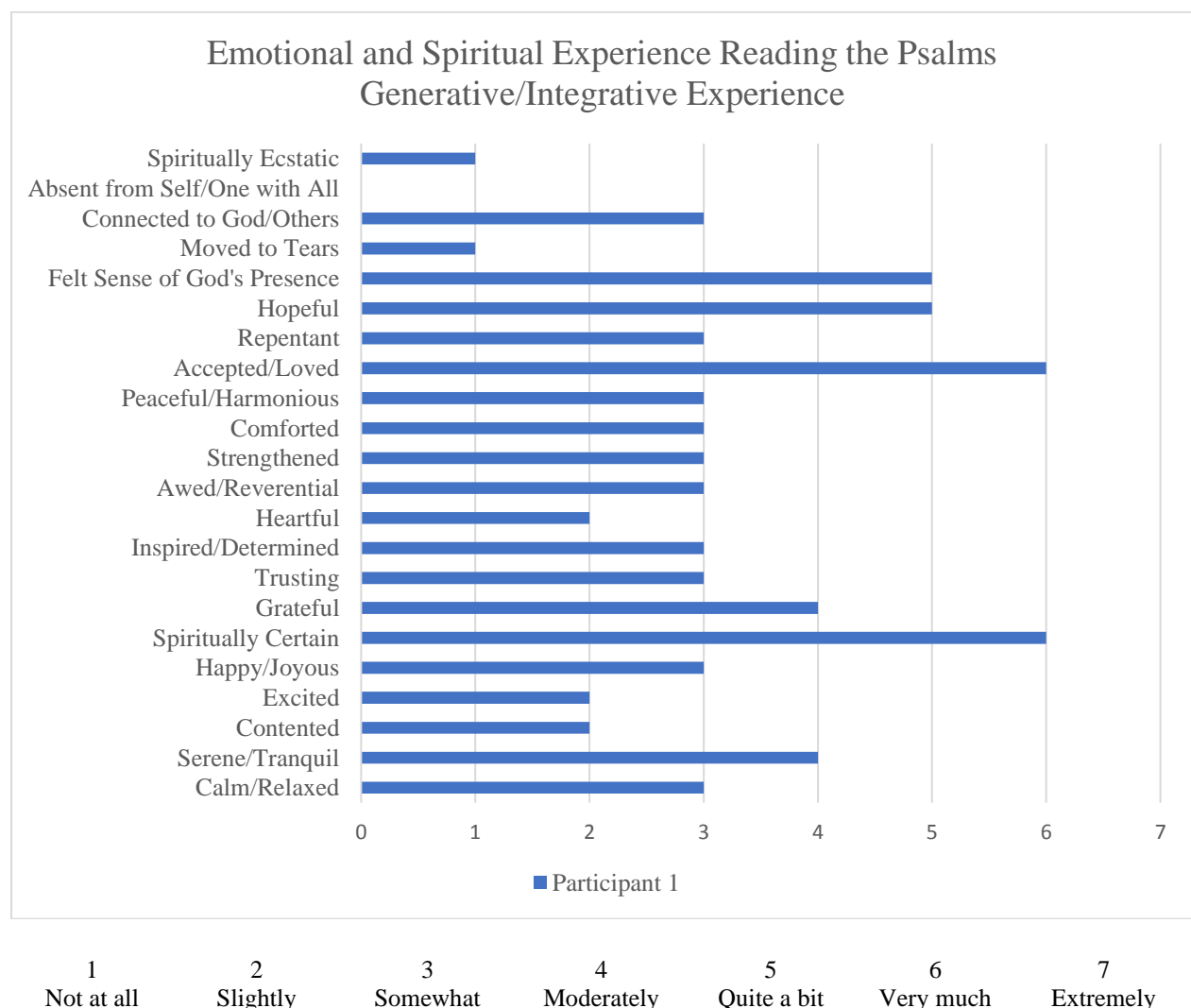
love the last two *ayah* [verses] – feel complete certainty that everything makes sense and God's got it handled, so to speak – feel light pouring in during and by the end.”⁷⁴⁵

Participant 1's Emotional and Spiritual Experience Reading the Psalms from the Holy Bible (in English)

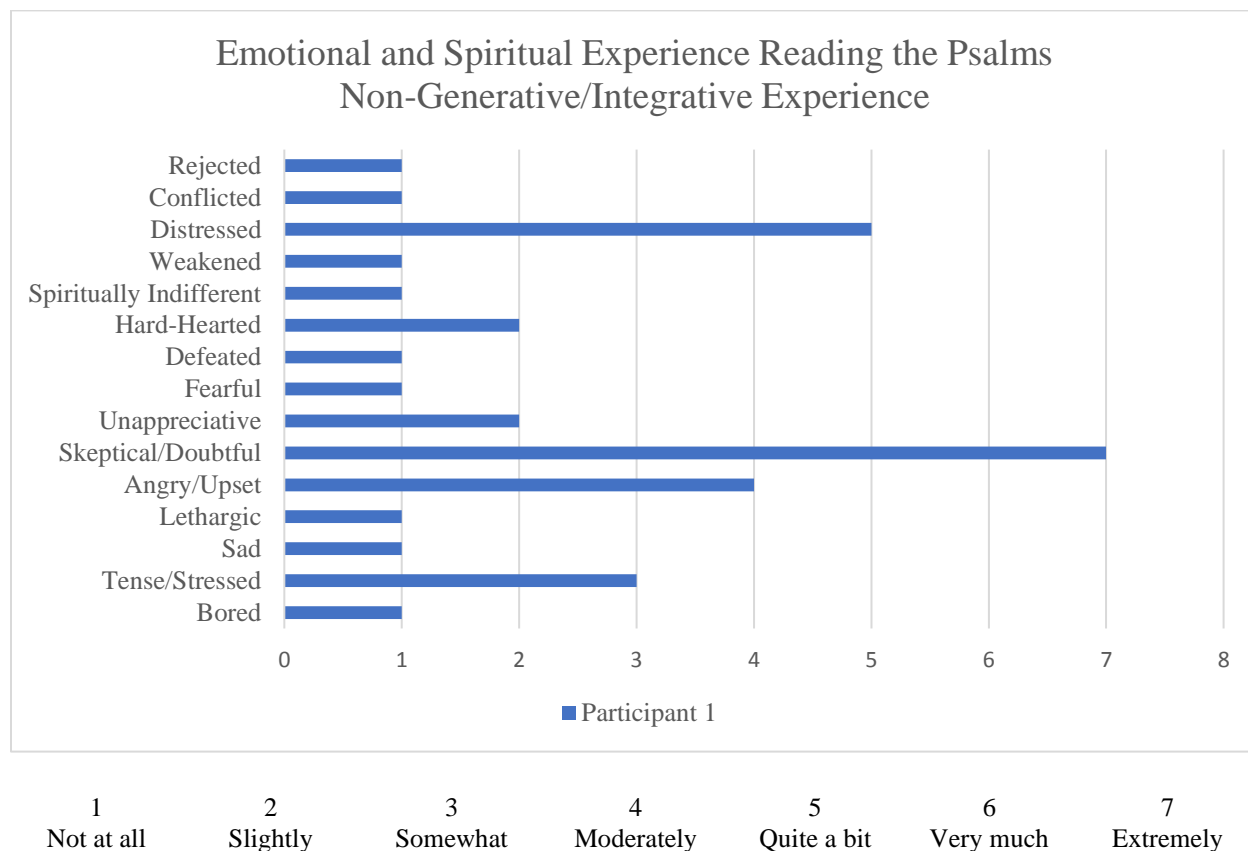
The following questions and responses are depicted in the charts below. The response to the first question, Bored, was 1. The second question was Calm/Relaxed; the response was 3. The third was Tense/Stressed; the response was 3. The fourth was Serene/Tranquil; the response was 4. The fifth was Sad; the response was 1. The sixth was Contented; the response was 2. The seventh was Lethargic; the response was 1. The eighth was Excited; the response was 2. The ninth was Angry/Upset; the response was 4. The tenth was Happy/Joyous; the response was 3. The eleventh was Skeptical/Doubtful; the response was 7. The twelfth was Spiritually Certain; the response was 6. The thirteenth was Unappreciative; the response was 2. The fourteenth was Grateful; the response was 4. The fifteenth was Fearful; the response was 1. The sixteenth was Trusting; the response was 3. The seventeenth was Defeated; the response was 1. The eighteenth was Inspired/Determined; the response was 3. The nineteenth was Hard-Hearted (Constricted, Closed Off); the response was 2. The twentieth was Heartful (Heart Softening or 'Opening'); the response was 2. The twenty-first was Spiritually Indifferent; the response was 1. The twenty-second was Awed/Reverential; the response was 3. The twenty-third was Weakened; the response was 1. The twenty-fourth was Strengthened; the response was 3. The twenty-fifth was Distressed; the response was 5. The twenty-sixth was Comforted; the response was 3. The twenty-seventh was Conflicted; the response was 1. The twenty-eighth was

⁷⁴⁵ Participant 1 Emotional and Spiritual Experience Questionnaire – *Yā Sīṭīn*, July 19, 2020, 4.

Peaceful/Harmonious; the response was 3. The twenty-ninth was Rejected; the response was 1. The thirtieth was Accepted/Loved; the response was 6. The thirty-first was Repentant; the response was 3. The thirty-second was Hopeful; the response was 5. The thirty-third was Felt Sense of God's Presence/Help/Guidance; the response was 5. The thirty-fourth was Moved to Tears; the response was 1. The thirty-fifth was Connected to God/Others; the response was 3. The thirty-sixth was Absent from Self/One with All of Life; there was no response. The thirty-seventh was Spiritually Ecstatic; the response was 1.



The mean response for generative/integrative emotional and spiritual experience was 3.09.



The mean response for non-generative/integrative experience was 2.13.

These responses show a marked difference between Participant 1’s emotional and spiritual experience of reciting *Sūrah Yā Sīn* and reading the Psalms – she experienced the former as much more generative and spiritually fulfilling than the latter. Even though the participant referred to herself as “an Abrahamic girl” in our interview, she had a “reaction of repugnance” to a theological difference between Islam and Christianity that was presented in one of the psalms; this reaction “reverberated throughout the rest of the practice.”⁷⁴⁶ Just as she

⁷⁴⁶ Participant 1 Emotional and Spiritual Experience Questionnaire – Psalms, September 2, 2020, 4.

reported that she did not experience the same transformative effect when reading an English interpretation of the Qur’ān as she did when reciting in Arabic, Participant 1 contrasted the English of the Psalms with the Arabic of the Qur’ān. Speaking of the Qur’ān, she said, “It’s clear that Allah is often addressing the human being, or women as well as men, or women specifically,” as opposed to her reading of the Psalms, in which she was “triggered by all the male gender language.”⁷⁴⁷ Despite these reactions, Participant 1 expressed delight at “how similar the teachings were to the Qur’ān.”⁷⁴⁸ She also reported feeling “the sincerity of the psalmist – the transmission of the Prophet Dawud [David], perhaps.”⁷⁴⁹

Participant 2 Interview

The second interviewee is a white female in her fifties. She is a Methodist Christian. She described spirituality as “being in touch with the untouchable in your faith.”⁷⁵⁰ The spiritual formation practices that are most important to her are prayer, mindfulness, and worship. She also especially likes Sybil MacBeth’s practice of praying in color:

Her intercessory praying in color just changed my – it just changed my life, it changed my prayer life tremendously. And often times when I’m reading or preparing to teach a class, that reading, that praying in color, that time alone with scripture will put someone something, some event, on my heart and while I’ve got my genre there, I will just start – I will just do the praying in color. And I’m very kinesthetic anyway. So that physicality of drawing and connecting the bubbles and doodling and looking at color and how – what color should I use to connect this person’s name to the central element of the praying in color thing that I’m doing.⁷⁵¹

Engaging sacred text has a central role in Participant 2’s life. She described reading scripture as “a springboard for everything else that happens in my day,” and as an impetus for spending time

⁷⁴⁷ Participant 1 Emotional and Spiritual Experience Questionnaire – Psalms, September 2, 2020, 4.

⁷⁴⁸ Participant 1 Emotional and Spiritual Experience Questionnaire – Psalms, September 2, 2020, 4.

⁷⁴⁹ Participant 1 Emotional and Spiritual Experience Questionnaire – Psalms, September 2, 2020, 4.

⁷⁵⁰ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 1.

⁷⁵¹ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 2.

in solitude, “getting down and getting dirty with God,” calling someone, visiting someone, etc.⁷⁵² She also described her process as a choral director of “going through and then looking at how composers and lyricists treated the text, whether it was a melodic motif that they embraced or a particular refrain that got repeated, that spoke to me another level of text interpretation.”⁷⁵³ Her most important spiritual practice engaging sacred text is *lectio divina*. She first tried *lectio* about 20 years ago and initially felt like she could not “get anything out of it.”⁷⁵⁴ Now she engages in *lectio* about twice a week for about an hour to an hour and a half and enjoys it so much that she has a hard time stopping. She does *lectio* in English; she usually does it silently, though if she feels like she is “not getting anywhere, then [she’ll] do it out loud.”⁷⁵⁵ She frequently combines her *lectio* practice with *visio*, i.e., “look[ing] for an image or images that support or augment or challenge the text.”⁷⁵⁶ In relation to her process for the practice, she indicated that she “definitely” follows the traditional four-step process associated with the practice – *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*.⁷⁵⁷ Like Pennington and Hall, she finds preparing for the practice an important step, relating that for her this preparatory stage centers around sacred space as the location where she performs *lectio* is important to her. Like Wiederkehr and Hugh of Saint-Victor, she also recommends an additional step that she terms “*applicio*.”⁷⁵⁸ She defines *applicio* as “applying what it is that you have received even if it says you need to do more.”⁷⁵⁹ She uses this term to avoid the connotation of an outer, physical action when the process of *lectio* guides the practitioner to an internal, spiritual one.

⁷⁵² Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 2.

⁷⁵³ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 3.

⁷⁵⁴ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 1.

⁷⁵⁵ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 13.

⁷⁵⁶ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 3.

⁷⁵⁷ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 13.

⁷⁵⁸ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 13.

⁷⁵⁹ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 13.

Participant 2 reported that *lectio* changed how she relates to scripture. Though she had participated in Bible studies, she did not find them engaging. While she acknowledged that *lectio* did not resonate with her initially, she said that Macrina Wiederkehr's book *Song of the Seed* "planted the seed."⁷⁶⁰ Years after her initial exposure to *lectio*, after her husband's cancer diagnosis, she "just sat down and just surrendered, I just surrendered and said okay, you're going to have to show me how to do this, because I just don't know, I just don't know. And that's – believe it or not, I pulled that book out again. I pulled out Macrina's book and I said I get it now."⁷⁶¹

When asked to describe her experience of *lectio*, Participant 2 described a rich emotional, spiritual, and physical experience: "I have a physical response to Lectio ... I bet you if I were to take my heart rate and my pulse before and after, there would be a physical change of a slowing down – of embracing – of my heart beat embracing what I feel is God's nature. There is ... a physical warming and openness – a centering that happens. And those are real physical manifestations with me."⁷⁶² Regarding her emotional experience, Participant 2 likened it to the experience of walking in the door of her parent's house and feeling home: "The love washes over me and ... I can breathe, I can let everything just slide off of me and I am accepted for exactly who I am."⁷⁶³ She also reported that during the practice the feelings she experiences "run the gamut.... The predominant emotion is joy."⁷⁶⁴

These descriptions clearly portray the spiritual capacities for somatic sensation and emotions. Participant 2 reported that the capacity for attention plays an important role in the practice, as does intention, which she described as "more often global than specific."⁷⁶⁵ She

⁷⁶⁰ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 3.

⁷⁶¹ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 4.

⁷⁶² Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 6.

⁷⁶³ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 6.

⁷⁶⁴ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 9.

⁷⁶⁵ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 8.

described using her awareness of spiritual capacities to help her focus her attention, and as a prompt to ask God for guidance if she is struggling in the practice. The spiritual capacity that seems most pertinent to her experience of *lectio* is relationality. This relational aspect of the practice is integral to her motivation for engaging sacred text and her experience of doing so:

God shows us in scripture over and over again that He is willing – that God is willing, the desire to be in covenant with God’s people. It’s like seven times in the Old Testament that God enters into a covenant with the people of Judah and tried something different every time. Well that didn’t work, let’s try this, let’s try the Ten Commandments, let’s try the 600 and whatever laws, let’s try this. Always being willing to say that didn’t work for My people.

I think of myself and all the changes that happened in my life. Like everyone else, life didn’t turn out the way I had it all lined out as a 16-year old girl. Yet all through life God showed up to have a relationship with me, to give me guidance, to give me comfort. So it’s the covenant-making God that continues to inspire me to go back to scripture.⁷⁶⁶

She also likened her experience of *lectio* to “picking up the phone and talking to a friend” – to having a conversation in which you connect, learn, grow, and receive inspiration.⁷⁶⁷ She concisely described her experience of *lectio* as “connection to the divine.”⁷⁶⁸

Participant 2’s experience of communication with God through *lectio* is transformative: “It has increased my listening acuity in both directions, listening to God and for God and then also listening to my response and being – willing to acknowledge that sometimes it is reaction and not response.... Being able to tell the difference and understanding that it may be time to dismantle a particular reaction and turn it into a response if the reaction is not positive and fruit bearing and based in compassion and kindness even to myself.”⁷⁶⁹ The description provides a glimpse into her stances toward the thoughts, feelings, and images that emerge while she is doing

⁷⁶⁶ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 6.

⁷⁶⁷ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 6-7.

⁷⁶⁸ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 7.

⁷⁶⁹ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 8.

lectio. She related that when a memory, image, or emotion emerges in the practice, she will “sit with them a while and figure out where that’s coming from,” and how to respond.⁷⁷⁰

Participant 2 stated that the relational aspect of *lectio*, especially as a form of communication, “has served as an arena for inspiration for me.”⁷⁷¹ She related an experience of using *lectio* when designing a worship service. Her *lectio* practice on the Biblical passage depicting Jacob wrestling with the angel inspired her to design a worship service around the congregants naming the things they were wrestling with, writing them down on an angel cutout, and placing them on an altar-scape in one service, and then taking someone else’s angel cutout and performing intercessory prayer for whatever was written on that angel the following service. She also related a similar inspirational experience of performing *lectio* with the Beatitudes, pairing them with passages from the Tao Te Ching, and exploring how they could inform each other, which then formed the basis of a worship service she offered when she preached at a Unitarian Universalist church.

The capacity for imagination also plays an important role in Participant’s 2 *lectio* process. On the topic of the imaginative capacity, she reported the following:

Often times I will draw the scene in my mind. Like I told you, I’m very much a spatial person, a spatially aware person. I will – it will play out like a motion picture in my mind. One of the practices that I had my retreat people do was to put yourself in the scene and to engage one of the characters.... So I will often do that and if that starts bubbling up then I’ll sit down and I’ll – in my journal, I’ll just write the dialogue out. He said this, she said this, he asked that, she responded this. So that will emerge, that will absolutely emerge.”⁷⁷²

Not only does her experience of the imaginative capacity during *lectio* emerge as journaling dialogue, it also emerges as dance and poetry. Of her experience of writing poetry, she said the following: “Maybe there is one word that pops up from that scene like impoverished, decadent,

⁷⁷⁰ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 9.

⁷⁷¹ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 10.

⁷⁷² Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 9.

flourish -- there'll be one word that just rises to the surface like a rocket and I'll take that one word and just dwell on it and see how I'm supposed to go deeper with that word."⁷⁷³

Additionally, Participant 2 described her experience of *lectio* as a sustained practice:

"When I engage in *lectio*, it becomes a streaming that I'm walking down all day along. And I try to make myself available for things to just keep bubbling up inside me.... The actual practice primes the pump for the rest of the day as far as I'm concerned."⁷⁷⁴ Not only does she experience *lectio* as a source of ongoing nourishment, she also experiences it as guidance, referring to it as the "plumb line in [her] life."⁷⁷⁵ She is referring here to the plumb line one uses to mark the wall in order to make a straight line when hanging wallpaper, conveying that *lectio* establishes a true direction for her life.

Participant 2's Emotional and Spiritual Experience Doing *Lectio Divina* with Psalms 119:33-40 from the Holy Bible (in English)

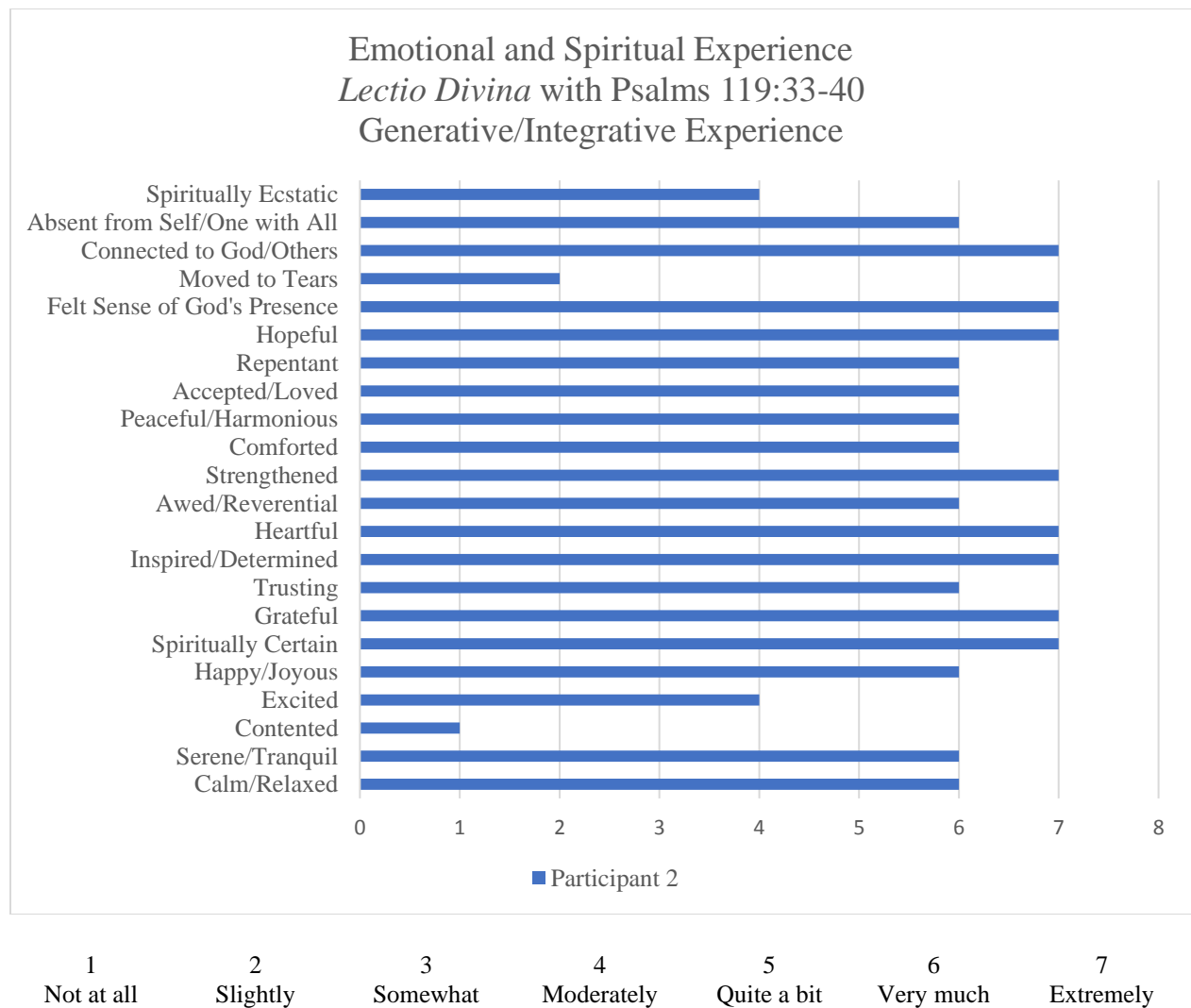
The following questions and responses are depicted in the charts below. The first question was Bored; Participant 2's response to this item was 1. The second was Calm/Relaxed; the response was 6. The third was Tense/Stressed; the response was 2. The fourth was Serene/Tranquil; the response was 6. The fifth was Sad; the response was 1. The sixth was Contented; the response was 1. The seventh was Lethargic; the response was 1. The eighth was Excited; the response was 4. The ninth was Angry/Upset; the response was 1. The tenth was Happy/Joyous; the response was 6. The eleventh was Skeptical/Doubtful; the response was 1. The twelfth was Spiritually Certain; the response was 7. The thirteenth was Unappreciative; the response was 1. The fourteenth was Grateful; the response was 7. The fifteenth was Fearful; the

⁷⁷³ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 9.

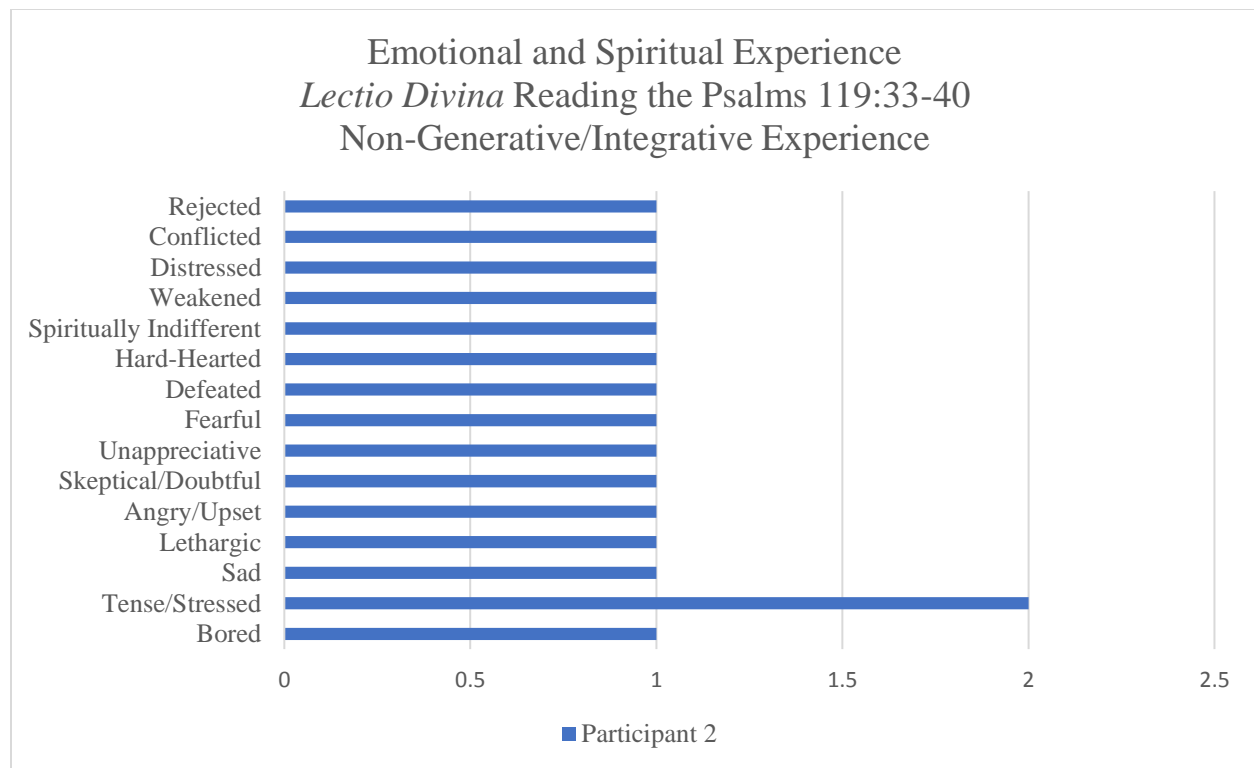
⁷⁷⁴ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 12.

⁷⁷⁵ Participant 2, interview with the author, August 17, 2020, 12.

response was 1. The sixteenth was Trusting; the response was 6. The seventeenth was Defeated; the response was 1. The eighteenth was Inspired/Determined; the response was 7. The nineteenth was Hard-Hearted (Constricted, Closed Off); the response was 1. The twentieth was Heartful (Heart Softening or 'Opening'); the response was 7. The twenty-first was Spiritually Indifferent; the response was 1. The twenty-second was Awed/Reverential; the response was 6. The twenty-third was Weakened; the response was 1. The twenty-fourth was Strengthened; the response was 7. The twenty-fifth was Distressed; the response was 1. The twenty-sixth was Comforted; the response was 6. The twenty-seventh was Conflicted; the response was 1. The twenty-eighth was Peaceful/Harmonious; the response was 6. The twenty-ninth was Rejected; the response was 1. The thirtieth was Accepted/Loved; the response was 6. The thirty-first was Repentant; the response was 3. The thirty-second was Hopeful; the response was 7. The thirty-third was Felt Sense of God's Presence/Help/Guidance; the response was 7. The thirty-fourth was Moved to Tears; the response was 2. The thirty-fifth was Connected to God/Others; the response was 7. The thirty-sixth was Absent from Self/One with All of Life; the response was 6. The thirty-seventh was Spiritually Ecstatic; the response was 4.



The mean response for generative/integrative emotional and spiritual experience was 5.90.



1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 Not at all Slightly Somewhat Moderately Quite a bit Very much Extremely

The mean response for non-generative/integrative experience was 1.01.

As with the participant’s response to Felt Sense of God’s Presence/Help/Guidance with a 7, i.e., extremely, and with her response to Connected to God/Others with a 7, these responses in aggregate corroborate the participant’s description of her experience of *lectio* in the interview. Her overall experience of the practice was transformative and uplifting. She described it as follows: “I was relieved to find a scripture that spoke to me in my current state of mind. It was a healing experience, one that encouraged me to move forward – getting me unstuck from my sadness. I felt heard by God and ministered to by God’s word.”⁷⁷⁶

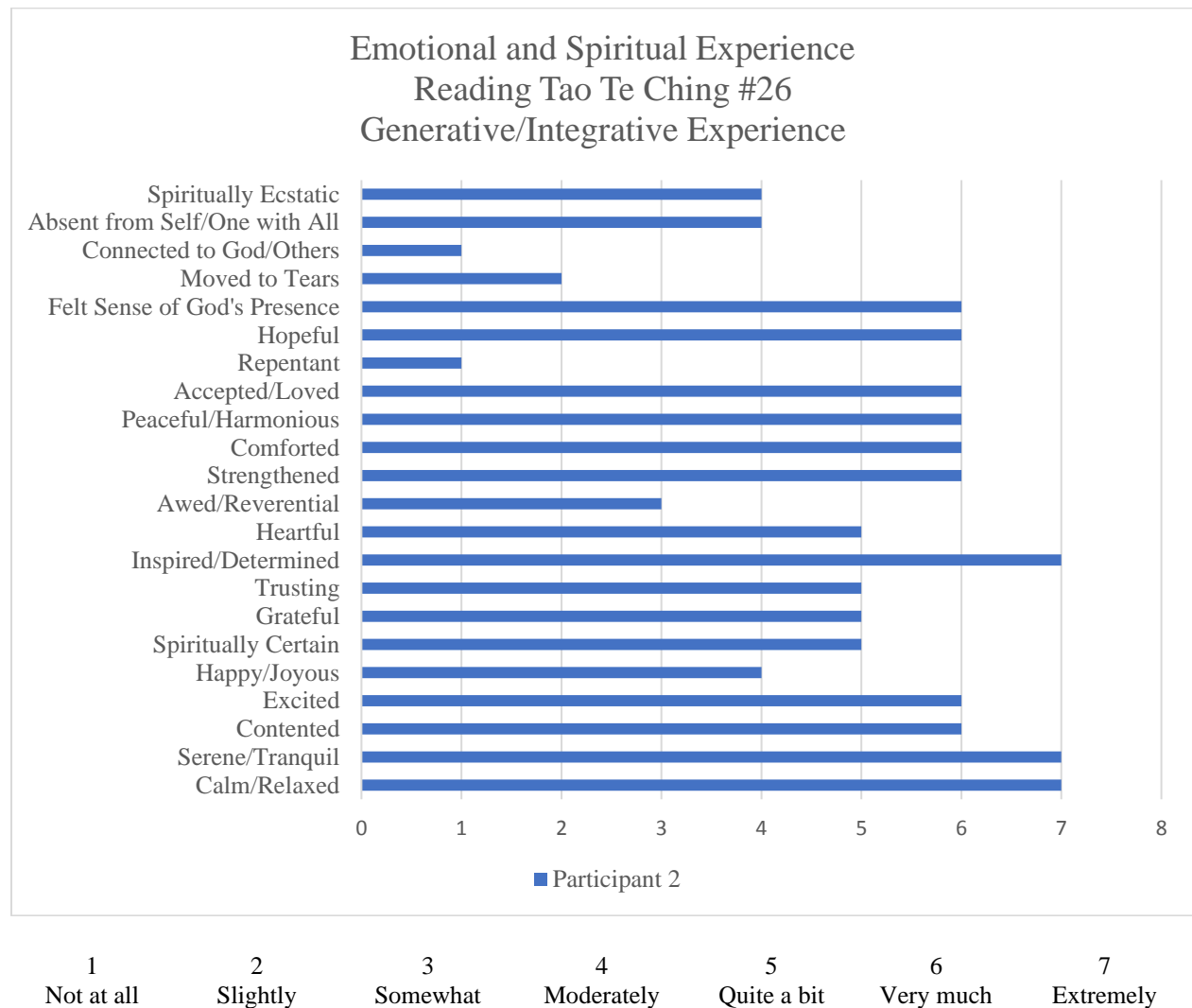
⁷⁷⁶ Participant 2 Emotional and Spiritual Experience Questionnaire – Psalms, September 4, 1010, 4.

Participant 2's Emotional and Spiritual Experience Reading Tao Te Ching #26 (in English)

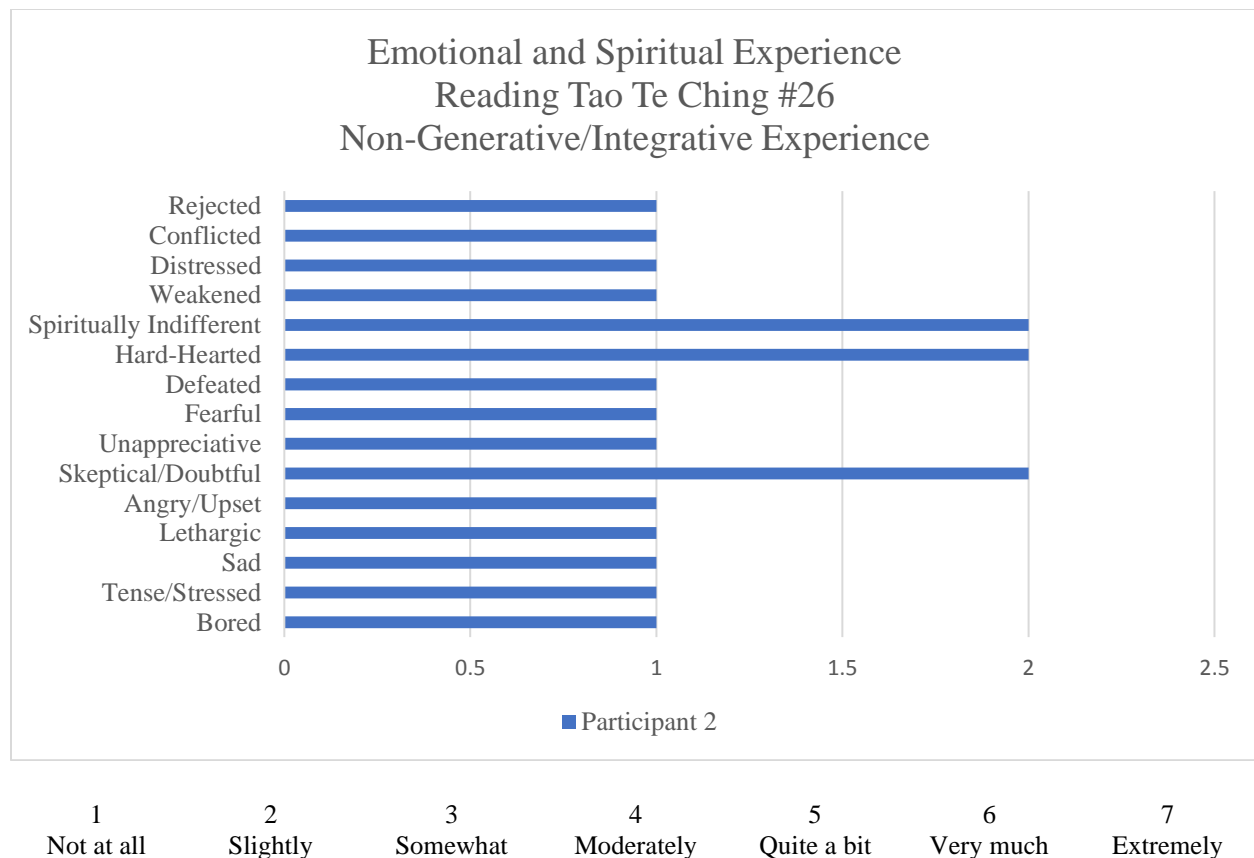
The following questions and responses are depicted in the charts below. The first question was Bored; Participant 2's response to this item was 1. The second was Calm/Relaxed; the response was 7. The third was Tense/Stressed; the response was 1. The fourth was Serene/Tranquil; the response was 7. The fifth was Sad; the response was 1. The sixth was Contented; the response was 6. The seventh was Lethargic; the response was 1. The eighth was Excited; the response was 6. The ninth was Angry/Upset; the response was 1. The tenth was Happy/Joyous; the response was 4. The eleventh was Skeptical/Doubtful; the response was 2. The twelfth was Spiritually Certain; the response was 5. The thirteenth was Unappreciative; the response was 1. The fourteenth was Grateful; the response was 5. The fifteenth was Fearful; the response was 1. The sixteenth was Trusting; the response was 5. The seventeenth was Defeated; the response was 1. The eighteenth was Inspired/Determined; the response was 7. The nineteenth was Hard-Hearted (Constricted, Closed Off); the response was 2. The twentieth was Heartful (Heart Softening or 'Opening'); the response was 5. The twenty-first was Spiritually Indifferent; the response was 2. The twenty-second was Awed/Reverential; the response was 3. The twenty-third was Weakened; the response was 1. The twenty-fourth was Strengthened; the response was 6. The twenty-fifth was Distressed; the response was 1. The twenty-sixth was Comforted; the response was 6. The twenty-seventh was Conflicted; the response was 1. The twenty-eighth was Peaceful/Harmonious; the response was 6. The twenty-ninth was Rejected; the response was 1. The thirtieth was Accepted/Loved; the response was 6. The thirty-first was Repentant; the response was 1. The thirty-second was Hopeful; the response was 6. The thirty-third was Felt Sense of God's Presence/Help/Guidance; the response was 6. The thirty-fourth was Moved to

Tears; the response was 2. The thirty-fifth was Connected to God/Others; the response was 1.

The thirty-fifth was Absent from Self/One with All of Life; the response was 4. The thirty-sixth was Spiritually Ecstatic; the response was 2.



The mean response for generative/integrative emotional and spiritual experience was 4.82.



The mean response for non-generative/integrative experience was 1.36.

While Participant 2's mean response for generative/integrative emotional and spiritual experience of reading the Tao Te Ching was not as high as her mean response for *lectio* with Psalm 119, it was still approximately a 5, i.e., quite a bit. These aggregate responses reinforce the fulfilling *lectio* experience she related in the interview (when she followed the *lectio* process to bring the Tao Te Ching together with the Beatitudes). At the same time, she related that her experience with Tao Te Ching #26 was more intellectual than emotional while still being meaningful: "The Tao challenges me intellectually so I think my emotions are more in 'check'

because I am searching for connection. #26 was full of revelation for me. ‘The heavy is the root of the light.’ So much to unpack here.”⁷⁷⁷

Considerations

With Qur’ ānic recitation and *lectio divina* we see two different ways theistic spirituality is practiced. In both Qur’ ānic recitation and *lectio divina* we see ways of engaging sacred text that are grounded in faith in and reverence for God, and a sincere desire to hear and follow the voice of God. Thus, the spiritual capacity for relationality was central to both participants’ experience of engaging sacred text in their respective traditions. With both we see practices based in concepts of deepening one’s relationship with God as well as receiving God’s message for the practitioner. To this point Participant 1 referred to recitation as like “a love letter written specifically to me as well as to humanity,” and Participant 2 likened *lectio* to the love and acceptance she feels when she returns to her parent’s home. Both participants related that their experience with their practice has changed over time. Both participants reported experiencing uplifting emotions as well as challenging emotions and the transformation of those through the practice. Both related powerful physical responses to their practices. Both participants experienced the capacity for imagination as playing a key role in their practice. With both, we see a firm belief in the spiritual transformation possible through a sustained practice that influences their daily life. Further, through both Qur’ ānic recitation and *lectio divina*, the participants experienced the practices as healing and transformative, resulting in greater care for themselves and for others.

⁷⁷⁷ Participant 2 Emotional and Spiritual Experience Questionnaire – Tao Te Ching, September 4, 1010, 4.

At the same time, we see how the context for each practice affected the practitioner's experience. In Participant 1's explanation of her experience, we saw a parallel with Sells' concept of the "sound vision" of the Qur'ān. In relation to her experience of the sound, Participant 1 reported the following: "I think I've always trusted the sound of it. For me, back to the first time I noticed it on the cassette, I think I was feeling the transmission without realizing that's what it was, but I completely trusted that."⁷⁷⁸ Along these same lines, she said, "The sound pours over me – I'm relating to it through the sound and through the experience and peace afterwards."⁷⁷⁹ Participant 1 noted that her experience of the sound as transformative is tied to language: "The sound of it is what moves me through it [nausea or difficult emotions] when I'm reciting it in Arabic."⁷⁸⁰ Here we also see a key difference in the religious and cultural history of these sacred text practices. With Qur'ānic recitation, the original language of the text remains a primary language of worship while with *lectio divina* the original language of the text is often not the language used for worship. Just as Participant 1's experience of engaging sacred text within her tradition is impacted by the English language, her experience of engaging sacred text outside of her tradition was impacted by the English language. She also found a theological difference off-putting when reading sacred text outside of her tradition. Participant 2 emphasized the experience of sacred space as an important part of her practice; Participant 1 made no reference to space. As we see both sameness and difference in the overviews of Islamic and Christian spirituality, in the overview of Islamic and Christian spiritual formation practices, in the overview of Al-Ghazālī's and Merton's spirituality, and in the overviews of Qur'ānic

⁷⁷⁸ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 3.

⁷⁷⁹ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 9.

⁷⁸⁰ Participant 1, interview with the author, July 4, 2020, 11.

recitation and *lectio divina*, we also see sameness and difference in Participant 1's and Participant 2's emotional and spiritual experience engaging their respective sacred text practices.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Further Research

We can make some inferences from the interviews and emotional and spiritual experience questionnaires about the places where both sameness and difference were revealed. For example, the responses reveal the very personal nature of spiritual practices and how experience of sacred text practices ranges from person to person. In addition, we can infer from the participants' descriptions of their experience of the spiritual capacity for relationality that crafting an intention involving relationality would be beneficial when engaging sacred text. Getting a glimpse into the participants' experience in the context of our overview of the spiritualities, practices, and related neuroscience and psychophysiology, lays the groundwork for research aimed toward answering the following questions:

1. What do current neuroscientific and psychophysiological studies and understandings say about recitation of sacred text, and by extension, what do they say, if anything, about engaging sacred text in the language associated with worship in the worshipper's religion?
2. How do neuroscientific and psychophysiological perspectives help us (or not) understand and engage sacred text (by which I mean do we read it silently in English, meditate on passages from it, meditate on images from it, recite it aloud in its original language, etc.)?

The answers to these questions are not easily measured. For example, the first question reflects a focus on recitation of sacred text when recitation is not the primary means of engaging sacred text for many worshippers. Moreover, comparing recitation of sacred text in the language

associated with one's religious worship with recitation of sacred text in a language not associated with worship in that religion requires study participants who have some fluency in multiple languages. Along these lines, the degree to which one is receptive to the sacred text of another religion would certainly impact a comparison of one's experience of engaging said text, and would likely be tied to one's personal beliefs in relation to religious pluralism, dependent on self-report, and also extremely difficult to measure. Even so, a fuller understanding of what occurs in the brain and body when engaging sacred text and the basis and actions associated with those occurrences would yield useful information for both religious worshippers and spiritual but not religious seekers. The area of future research that seems most promising is the sort of research that Spezio mentioned – research with “simultaneously synchronized, high-resolution fMRI of both the heart and the brain together” (to the extent that doing so is physically possible) – with the involvement of those with expertise in HRV coherence, with the addition of specific measures to gain the participants' self-report of their emotional and spiritual experience, with the goal of exploring whether neuroscientific and psychophysiological occurrence is the same for different practitioners of the same sacred text practice, and with the goal of exploring whether neuroscientific and psychophysiological occurrence is the same for the same practitioner engaging in different sacred text practices.

Reviewing other researchers' work offers the opportunity to offer suggestions about key components for future research. As stated previously, I recommend that research in this field include subjective measures of participants' emotional and spiritual experience as well as objective measures of their physiological experience. Similarly, I recommend taking steps to ensure that the participants have sufficient transition time between measured tasks to ensure that the task is represented rather than a transition into the task (especially in reference to gathering

physiological data). I also recommend taking steps to ensure that the participants have sufficient time engaged in the practice being measured, i.e., timing the physiological measures so that they are as likely as possible to capture the state they are meant to capture (as opposed to measurements that occur 30 seconds after beginning a new task, for example). Accordingly, I suggest collaboration between experts in neuroscience, HRV coherence, and spiritual practice to determine how best to obtain physiological measurements of both the heart and brain as well as HRV coherence measurements (possibly using HRV software developed by the Institute of HeartMath) during baseline, resting, recitation, and reading states, such as:

- a two-minute resting state,
- a baseline state during which the participant reads something not likely to elicit an emotional response (like calling card instructions) for ten minutes,
- a fifteen-minute reading or recitation state during which the participant reads or recites a sacred text in accordance with and from their own tradition in the language associated with religious worship,
- for participants whose worship language is the original language of the sacred text but is not their first language, a fifteen-minute reading or recitation state during which the participant reads or recites the same text from their tradition in their first language, and
- a fifteen-minute state during which the participant reads or recites a sacred text from another tradition in the participant's first language.

I recommend that the researchers begin with the baseline state followed by a resting state and randomizing the reading/recitation states with a resting state between each. I also recommend obtaining the physiological data measurements at five minutes and 10 minutes in the

baseline reading state, at two minutes in the first resting state, and at five minutes and 10 minutes during each of the recitation states. Ideally, research of this sort would involve enough participants to demonstrate statistical significance and include a participant sample with an age distribution as well as diversity in gender, ethnicity, etc. Research of this nature may be an effective avenue for increasing awareness of how neuroscientific and psychophysiological processes impact our religious and spiritual experiences and the experiences of our neighbors, which in turn may be an effective avenue for promoting mutual respect and appreciation for those with whom we hold divergent beliefs.

Conclusion

I suspect that such research would yield further ‘both ... and ...’ findings. Perhaps the findings of such research would yield a reaction like that of Hagerty’s to Newberg’s work when she wrote the following: “For me personally, Newberg’s brain scans are theological dynamite. They boil down to this: a mystical state is a mystical state. The closer one draws to a transcendent state – or, as Newberg calls it, ‘absolute unitary being’ – the more the descriptions merge. Christian mystics sound like Sufi mystics, who sound like Jewish mystics, who sound like Buddhists.”⁷⁸¹ Successfully completing a study that follows the aforementioned recommendations would not change the fact that we do not definitively know that a particular area of the brain truly functions in the way we think it does. Thus, even with most well-conceived and well-executed research, we have a moral imperative to carefully consider the

⁷⁸¹ Barbara Bradley Hagerty, *Fingerprints of God: What Science Is Learning About the Brain and Spiritual Experience* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 175.

consequences of making any claims about the brain and the heart in relation to engaging sacred text practices.

In his discussion of methodology in neurotheological research, Newberg speaks to the complexity of the brain, stating that “there appear to be a number of brain structures that become activated or deactivated depending on the nature of the practice (Newberg and Iversen, 2003).”⁷⁸² The same holds true for the complexity of the body as a whole and an individual’s emotional and spiritual experience, which occur within the context of each individual’s cultural, religious, and unique personal history. Along these same lines Newberg points out the overall difficulty in drawing conclusions from neurotheological research: “There is probably too much variability in normal human function to clearly differentiate the effectiveness and accuracy of certain beliefs or practices.”⁷⁸³ Thus, I continue to emphasize that what individuals relate about their experience is just as important as physiological data about that experience. Newberg seems to agree with this perspective, writing that “the ability to measure such states [the actual subjective state experienced during a spiritual practice] empirically while not disturbing such states is almost impossible. Hence, it is important to ascertain as much as possible what the person thinks they are experiencing.”⁷⁸⁴ Thus, researchers in this field need to stay in wonder, recognizing the impossibility of knowing, as well as recognizing their individual limitations – the spiritual formation teacher does not know the methodological limitations of neuroscience – the neuroscientist may lack theological and esoteric mystical knowledge – the Muslim’s and the Christian’s expertise lies in the religion and denomination they practice in accordance with their teachers so they likely lack the expertise of the other – and so on. Hence, the implication of

⁷⁸² Andrew Newberg, “Methodological Principles for Research in Neurotheology: Practical and Philosophical Implications,” *NeuroQuantology* 4 (2010): 539.

⁷⁸³ Newberg, 541.

⁷⁸⁴ Newberg, “Methodological Principles,” 540.

neurospiritual and psychophysiological inquiry may simply be that the path to knowledge about how to best engage sacred text is the path of self-knowledge.

That said, the overview of current neuroscientific and psychophysiological understandings related to religious/spiritual/contemplative practices revealed that in our contingent existence, in our human bodies, who we are at any given moment is largely a result of our synapses, of what we are thinking, of whatever biochemical bath our body is in. As Daugherty writes, “The ‘science of embodiment’ ... encourages us to look at the body as an experiential space in which heartfulness is allowed to flourish, grow, and transform our inner lives, outer lives, and world.... [and] shows us that whatever inner states we authentically, and most often experience, become the operating forces in our life.”⁷⁸⁵ Embodiment then encourages serious consideration of our inner lives – the awareness of which comes for many of us through our spirituality and associated practices. This project’s overview of Islamic and Christian spiritualities and spiritual formation practices invites us to further consider the possibility of increasingly deeper layers of meaning in sacred texts, stages of spiritual development, experience of closeness to God, and levels of reality. Together, these encourage us to commit ourselves to the respective forms of our unending spiritual journeys toward realization of the “unity and oneness of ALL, in God ... the one Love which is God.”

⁷⁸⁵ Alane Daugherty, *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness* (Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press, 2014), 10-12.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What does spirituality mean to you?
2. What spiritual/religious practice is most important to you?
3. What spiritual practice involving sacred text is most important to you?
4. What other ways do you engage sacred text in your religious/spiritual practices?
5. How often do you engage in the above sacred text practice?
6. Please tell me your ‘story’ of this particular spiritual practice, i.e., how you were introduced to it, how long you’ve been doing it, why you do it, if your experience of doing it has changed over time....
7. Is there any historical event or cultural aspect that you find especially relevant to why you do this practice?
8. What specific religious/spiritual beliefs underlie your reasons for doing this practice?
9. What can you tell me about the foundation for those beliefs (are they based on a particular verse or something along those lines)?
10. What do you experience when you do this practice?
11. What does it mean to you?
12. Some spirituality professors talk about spiritual capacities as a way of better understanding and comparing spiritual practices. By “spiritual capacities” or “contemplative capacities” they are referring to the human capacity for *attention*, as in the ability to focus on the words of text and their meaning, *awareness* – awareness of what’s happening both internally and externally, one’s *intention* for the practice, *relationality* – i.e., one’s relationship to God. How are these capacities – attention, awareness, intention, relationality – important for how you engage this particular practice?
13. Does this practice affect how you relate to yourself, to God, to others? If so, how?
14. What emotions do you experience doing the practice?
15. Do you use your imagination during the practice? If so, how?
16. What is your approach to thoughts, images, memories that come up during the practice?
17. What do you learn from doing this practice?

18. Can you give me an example of an insight you have had as a result of doing this practice?
19. What is the relationship between this practice and the rest of your life?
20. Is it a sustained practice in the sense that you try to sustain it throughout the day? If so, what does that look like for you?
21. What language do you usually do the practice in? Do you feel/think that affects your experience?
22. Do you recommend this practice to others? Why or why not?
23. What else do you want me to know about your experience of this practice?
24. For the experiential portion of the research, you're planning to engage in ____ practice. Would you please tell me a bit about your experience of this practice. [if not covered by above]
25. Are you interested in providing feedback on the draft paper summarizing my research findings?

Appendix B: Emotional and Spiritual Experience Questionnaire

During this stage (while resting, reading the calling card instructions, engaging in recitation, etc.) to what extent did you feel/experience the following on a scale of 1 to 7?

Bored

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Moderately	Quite a bit	Very much	Extremely

Calm/Relaxed

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Tense/Stressed

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Serene/Tranquil

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Sad

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Contented

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Lethargic

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Excited

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Angry/Upset

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Moderately	Quite a bit	Very much	Extremely

Happy/Joyous

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Skeptical/Doubtful

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Spiritually Certain

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Unappreciative

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Grateful

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Fearful

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Trusting

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Defeated

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Inspired/Determined

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Moderately	Quite a bit	Very much	Extremely

Hard-Hearted (Constricted, Closed Off)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Heartful (Heart Softening Or ‘Opening’)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Spiritually Indifferent

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Awed/Reverential

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Weakened

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Strengthened

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Distressed

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Comforted

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Conflicted

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Moderately	Quite a bit	Very much	Extremely

Peaceful/Harmonious

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Rejected

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Accepted/Loved

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Repentant

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Hopeful

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Felt Sense of God's Presence/Help/Guidance

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Moved to Tears

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Connected to God / Others

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Absent from Self/One with All of Life

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not at all	Slightly	Somewhat	Moderately	Quite a bit	Very much	Extremely

Spiritually Ecstatic

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
---	---	---	---	---	---	---

How would you describe your experience in your own words? _____

Date: _____ Time: _____

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